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# **New Perspectives on Auschwitz**

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# **Introduction: New Perspectives on Auschwitz**

## **Auschwitz: Between History, Myth and Heritage**

Today, the word 'Auschwitz' has become symbolic, standing metonymically for the entirety of the Holocaust and as the denouement of the human capacity for murderous cruelty. Yet this ostensibly straightforward signification masks a complex history composed of millions of individual stories, competing political and national narratives, and ongoing debates about memory, commemoration and heritage. While the sheer scope of Auschwitz might serve to legitimize the centrality of the term, its common usage also reduces the vastness of the Nazi enterprise to a singular narrative. Jonathan Heuner writes:

Auschwitz, its victims, and its prisoners defy generalisations and convenient categorisations. Just as the history of the camp was multifaceted, so too have collective memories and public manifestations of those memories been diverse and at times even contradictory, to the extent that the commemoration of one prisoner or prisoner group has offended or silenced the memory of another.<sup>i</sup>

To speak of a singular 'Auschwitz experience' is misleading. Scaled up to the level of Hitler's entire 'Final Solution,' the use of Auschwitz as a catch-all term for 'the Holocaust experience' is profoundly problematic, obscuring the narratives of millions, including the many thousands who were slaughtered in the so-called 'Holocaust by bullets,'<sup>ii</sup> as well as those forced to spend the war in hiding. Even within the camp, individual experiences differed significantly, creating what Jonathan Webber has called 'a "mosaic" of victims.'<sup>iii</sup> The word 'Auschwitz' is thus not sufficient to capture the vastness of the Nazi enterprise, or the multiplicity of individual experience. Yet the reductive 'myth of Auschwitz' endures. The relationship between this symbolic version of the camp and its historical point of origin is complex.<sup>iv</sup> Webber writes:

‘Contemplated from afar, Auschwitz is a convenient shorthand symbol. Encountered close-up, however, it is not a symbol, it is a real place.’<sup>v</sup>

The ‘real place’ accessible today is, however, not the same as the ‘real place’ of history. From the perspective of the latter, the word ‘Auschwitz’ refers to what Maurizio Cinquegrani has called a ‘metropolis of death’<sup>vi</sup> and what Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt have termed ‘the epicenter of the Holocaust’<sup>vii</sup>: a series of camps, set up in and around the Polish town of Oswiecim in 1940. Initially conceived as a detention centre for Polish prisoners, it evolved to become a complex site of mass-extinction, incorporating three primary and more than forty satellite camps. All told, around one million Jews, 70-75,000 Poles, 21 thousand gypsies, 15 thousand Soviet POWs and 10-15,000 ‘others’ were subject to its horrors.<sup>viii</sup> Of the estimated 1.3 million people who were sent to Auschwitz, roughly 1.1 million were killed there.

In 1978, a year after it was first suggested as a possibility for inclusion, Auschwitz was designated a UNESCO world heritage site. Perhaps better known for its protection of sites deemed ‘irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration,’<sup>ix</sup> UNESCO also works to preserve a number of ‘dark heritage’ sites, including Auschwitz-Birkenau,<sup>x</sup> the slave-trading island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal (1978), the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, Genbaku Dome (1997) and Robben Island (1999). Yet even in the context of these dark sites, Auschwitz is unique; Alyza Lewin writes:

According to the minutes of the Committee's 1979 meeting, the Committee decided to enter Auschwitz concentration camp on the List as a “unique site” and decided to “restrict the inscription of other sites of a similar nature.” Auschwitz, therefore, is and will remain the only German concentration camp to be afforded the international recognition and protection that accompanies inscription on the World Heritage list.<sup>xi</sup>

The status of Auschwitz as the epicenter of the Holocaust is preserved through its designation as a World Heritage site as well as through the singularity of its position on the list.

Justifying the inclusion of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site, the UNESCO website states:

Auschwitz Birkenau, monument to the deliberate genocide of the Jews by the German Nazi regime and to the deaths of countless others, bears irrefutable evidence to one of the greatest crimes ever perpetrated against humanity. It is also a monument to the strength of the human spirit which in appalling conditions of adversity resisted the efforts of the German Nazi regime to suppress freedom and free thought and to wipe out whole races. The site is a key place of memory for the whole of humankind for the Holocaust, racist policies and barbarism; it is a place of our collective memory of this dark chapter in the history of humanity, of transmission to younger generations and a sign of warning of the many threats and tragic consequences of extreme ideologies and denial of human dignity.<sup>xii</sup>

Alongside its historical role and significance as a heritage site,<sup>xiii</sup> then, the camp is also understood as a *lieu de mémoire*,<sup>xiv</sup> and as a place that articulates, in its very existence, the dangers of extreme prejudice.

### **Visiting Auschwitz**

Since the end of the Second World War, the site has become a central part of engagements with the Nazi genocide. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum was established in 1947; that year, 170,000 people visited the site. Over the course of the next ten years, more than two million people visited. As the Second World War has slipped further back in history, visitor numbers have continued to climb: in 2017 alone, 2.1 million visitors attended the site (up from 2,053,000 in 2016 and 492, 500 in 2001).<sup>xv</sup> In the critical discourse, a number of prominent academics and survivors have shown that, for many, a visit to the site constitutes an important

part of contemporary engagements with the genocide, especially in the field of Holocaust education.<sup>xvi</sup>

Yet the ethics of these visits are still open to debate. The rise in visitor numbers almost certainly implies a rise in the tourist industry that surrounds the camp. A quick Google search will turn up a plethora of combined Auschwitz-Salt Mine tours, running from Kraków and surrounding areas. A visitor's centre, tourist showers, and various food outlets in the area all contribute to the touristy atmosphere of the camp.<sup>xvii</sup> In one of the most striking discussions of this phenomenon, Tim Cole speaks of visits to 'Auschwitz-land,' where 'we perhaps unwittingly enter a "Holocaust theme-park" rather than a "Holocaust concentration camp."'<sup>xviii</sup> The tourist industry that has grown around Auschwitz and other sites of dark heritage has the potential to turn these spaces of mass-atrocity into kitschy attractions that function as little more than fodder for the cultural imaginary.

Yet to speak of a singular visitor experience is erroneous. Familial history, levels of existing knowledge or interest, and personality are all factors that shape individual encounters with the site. 'Symbolic Auschwitz' also has a role to play in creating visitor expectations; certainly, many who embark on a visit do so with the aim of 'ticking off' the most paradigmatic aspects of the site, including the containers of hair and shoes that feature in the permanent exhibition, and the main gate bearing the famous 'Arbeit Macht Frei' slogan. It is worth quoting James E. Young at length, here:

By themselves, these remnants rise in a macabre dance of memorial ghosts. Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives that once animated them, so much as of the brokenness of lives. For when the memory of a people and its past are reduced to the bits and rags of their

belongings, memory of life itself is lost. What of the relationships and families sundered? What of the scholarship and education? The community and its traditions? Nowhere among this debris do we find traces of what bound these people together into a civilization, a nation, a culture. Heaps of scattered artefacts belie the interconnectedness of lives that made these victims a people. The sum of these dismembered fragments can never approach the whole that was lost.<sup>xix</sup>

These artefacts are iconic but they also reduce the victims to their absence, and they contribute to the voyeurism that is so often associated with this kind of dark tourism. It is in this context that Cole cynically calls Auschwitz ‘the ultimate rubberneckers experience.’<sup>xx</sup>

It is interesting to note, though, that such exhibits exist only in Auschwitz I; Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz II), on the other hand, is less built up and offers little in the way of tourist amenities or exhibitions. Auschwitz Monowitz (Auschwitz III) does not feature as part of the Museum at all. The difference between the main two sites, situated only a couple of miles apart, is stark. Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt observe that Auschwitz-Birkenau feels more like an appendix to the main museum at Auschwitz I,<sup>xxi</sup> while Tim Cole notes that he was surprised to experience two different Auschwitzs in the town of Oswiecim.<sup>xxii</sup> Cole goes on to say that ‘everyone comes to ‘Auschwitz’ with differing expectations, yet walks through the exhibits at ‘Auschwitz-land’ together.’<sup>xxiii</sup> His distinction between the Holocaust tourist and the Holocaust pilgrim – who visits the site with ‘loftier intentions’<sup>xxiv</sup> – might also be reflected in the double-ness of the museum site: Auschwitz I caters for the tourists, while Auschwitz-Birkenau provides a space of quiet reflection and mourning for the pilgrims.

However, discourses such as these do – problematically, in my view – suggest a hierarchy of visitor types. Except in the obvious case of Holocaust denial, it strikes me as dubious to make assumptions about how one *ought* to experience the camp. Even those who attend the site in



ostensibly problematic ways (as part of hen or stag parties, for example) surely do so with the best of intentions, and they may well take more than it appears from their visit.

Of course, the museum itself also plays a role in how the site is experienced and understood. Primarily, its aims are didactic: ‘Education at the Memorial is meant to foster reflection about the meaning of personal responsibility today, in Europe and beyond.’<sup>xxv</sup> Coupled with UNESCO’s claim (cited above) that a visit to Auschwitz will show people the dangers of extreme prejudice, the primary goal appears to be to teach or reinforce values of inclusivity and to promote empathy for others.

This might seem somewhat simplistic, but it is nevertheless avowed by a number of organisations. For example, trips for teenagers organized by the Holocaust Education Trust (HET) work on the assumption that a day visit to the site, coupled with pre- and post-excursion workshops, will effectively create new ‘ambassadors’ for Holocaust memory. The expectation, as Cole has noted, is that participants will communicate their experiences to others so that they, too, can ‘benefit from the experience.’<sup>xxvi</sup> This ‘benefit,’ one assumes, is that they, too, will be able to take on the lessons of the Holocaust and, one hopes, become better citizens.

In a striking move, Chelsea Football Club recently unveiled a new initiative with similar aims. Spearheaded by Roman Abramovich, who is himself Jewish, the scheme offers fans accused of racist conduct the opportunity to visit the concentration camp instead of facing a ban:

“If you just ban people, you will never change their behaviour,” the Chelsea chairman, Bruce Buck, told the Sun. “This policy gives them the chance to realise what they have done, to make them want to behave better.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

The case of Laurent Louis is just as intriguing. Louis, a former member of the Belgian Parliament, was found guilty of Holocaust denial in 2015. On appeal, a suspended six month sentence and fine of €18,000 were replaced - at the behest of Louis and his lawyer - with a

decree that he must instead embark on an annual pilgrimage to a concentration camp site and write about his experiences in his blog (the same blog that had been used to deny the Holocaust in the first place).<sup>xxviii</sup> His lawyer called the judgement ‘une décision de grande justice.’<sup>xxix</sup>

Yet there is little evidence that visiting Auschwitz will automatically stir empathy, create better citizens, or prove in any way transformative. Recent news reports of a group of teenagers performing a Hitler salute outside the famous Auschwitz gate is testament to this fact.<sup>xxx</sup> No doubt, incidents such as these are at least partially a result of the social-media climate of modern times. Since every experience can now be documented as part of a constructed online identity, it makes sense that significant encounters – such as those of Auschwitz – are experienced with one eye facing outward, towards the intended audience of digital friends or followers.<sup>xxxi</sup> Perhaps one consequence of this is that visitors to sites such as Auschwitz may engage less – or, at least, differently – with the site itself; moral lessons may therefore be diluted or taken on only later, with the benefit of hindsight and reflection. To be sure, cases such as these challenge the notion that visitors to the site automatically engage with it in the expected (moralistic) way.

### **New Perspectives on Auschwitz**

I started this introduction with an observation that the meaning of the word Auschwitz is multifaceted. Indeed, Auschwitz is a site of mass atrocity, a museum, a cemetery, a focal point of Holocaust memory, a place of education, a town in south west Poland, a tourist “must-see,” and a place where complex negotiations of identity and morality take place. Overshadowing all of these nuances, the word itself has entered common vernacular as shorthand for the Holocaust or, even more generally, as an example of a clear ethical binary. In this way, the word masks a complex and difficult history, often functioning as a linguistic and historical reduction that might be considered little more than fodder for the cultural imaginary.

These complexities were the focus of the second conference of the European Association for Holocaust Studies, held in Kraków in November 2017. The present volume aims to continue the fruitful discussions that began at that conference, and to spark further discussion on the question(s) of Auschwitz. The collection is roughly divided into four sections: pedagogy, representation, dissemination and memory. These categories are only supposed to be understood as rough thematic guidelines and, while it is hoped that they provide some kind of formal structure, they are not supposed to be seen as restrictive; rather, the papers collected in this volume all flow into and interact with one another, oscillating around the central theme of the volume.

Opening the collection, [authors' names] examine the understanding that English secondary school students have of Auschwitz, as well as the role that the camp plays in their education. Drawing on a sample of over 8,000 participants, the authors conclude that Auschwitz remains dominant in teaching practices, but that students display a worrying lack of understanding of the nuances of the camp system. Ultimately, this research shows that the simplified myth of Auschwitz is also being disseminated in England through educational practices.

[name] also examines the pedagogical usefulness of Auschwitz, focusing on the benefits and issues surrounding educational visits to the Auschwitz museum. Taking the Holocaust Education Trust's *Lessons from Auschwitz* project as a case study, [name] draws on his experience as a teacher, a researcher and a HET educator to offer thoughts on what might be considered 'good pedagogical practice.'

[name] takes a different approach. His chapter 'The image of Auschwitz in Polish history textbooks (1956 -1999)' shows how Polish history textbooks reflect memory politics of their respective periods in Poland. More specifically, the author shows how history was instrumentalised in and through school textbooks in the Communist and the post-Communist

eras. Structured chronologically, the chapter shows how textbooks have transitioned from focusing on Auschwitz as a site of Polish martyrdom to one of Jewish suffering.

Moving away from pedagogical concerns, [name's] chapter, 'From Auschwitz to Jedwabne: Holocaust Memory in post-1989 Polish Fiction' continues on the theme of Polish memory. It examines the ways in which Polish Holocaust literature shapes and is shaped by political forces. The author identifies three stages that roughly map the trajectory of post-war Polish-Jewish relations: the suppression of the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy, a period of Polish confrontation with its past, and a focus on pre-war Jewish life that the author identifies as an attempt at 're-judaising the Polish literary landscape.'

Also looking at representations of Auschwitz, albeit from a different perspective, [name] tackles representations of the Sonderkommando in artistic representations. Paying particular attention to the works of David Olère and László Nemes, the author engages with ongoing debates about the ethics of Holocaust representation and reflects on the specific issues associated with depictions – both testimonial and artistic – of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando.

The relationship between witnessing, testimony and translation is the centre of [name's] analysis of the Sonderkommando. Moving away from the literary and artistic renderings discussed in the previous article, the author examines the testimony of Filip Müller, a native Czechoslovak who opted to speak in German at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. Speaking of the 'collaborative production of witness narratives,' [name] shows that court interpreters can play an active role in shaping testimony and that their interventions feed, in a variety of ways, into a complex network of interactions and exchanges.

[Name's] contribution also looks at the ways in which information about Auschwitz has been shaped, if not entirely controlled, by external factors. His article – 'The Liberation of Auschwitz in the Spanish Press: From Connivance to Criticism' – tracks reports of Auschwitz

in the Spanish news in the immediate aftermath of the war; it argues that the volume and content of these reports were contingent on the shifting position of the Francoist government.

Spain is also the focus of [name's] contribution: 'Relations Between Spain and Auschwitz: An Approximation through Different Groups of Victims.' Here, the shifting political loyalties of the Franco regime are used to contextualise Spain's relationship with Auschwitz; the significance of this association is underscored by a series of life stories, aimed at showing the variety of experience of Spanish victims of the camp. Finally, these narratives are used to comment on the inadequacy of Spanish engagements with the Holocaust.

In 'Auschwitz as a Symbol of Martyrdom of the Polish Nation, 1947-2017,' [name] provides a timely reflection on the changing nature of Polish memory over a seventy year period. Looking particularly at the significance of official events and the policies that shape them, the author examines the politics that shape Polish engagements with the genocide. In particular, the article shows how universalist messages have enabled narratives of Polish suffering to endure.

Finally, [name's] paper shows how language is used by policy makers and local residents to create two distinct memoryscapes: Auschwitz and Oswiecim. According to the author, this separation, evident in interviews and social media interactions, helps locals to distinguish between their daily life in the town and the concentration camp on its outskirts. As the author shows, these distinctions are determined by their context and audience, suggesting the presence of intricate in-group/out-group dynamics.

The seemingly eclectic mix of viewpoints gathered here is deliberate. It would of course have been possible to put together a collection on any one of the four primary topics mentioned above, but to have taken this approach would have falsely implied that the topic of Auschwitz could be dealt with adequately by a single disciplinary or thematic perspective.

Interdisciplinarity and diversity are thus defining features of this volume. Collectively, the four sections – pedagogy, representation, dissemination and memory - point to the complex, evolving, and multi-faceted nature of our present-day understanding of Auschwitz.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Heuner, *Auschwitz*, page.

<sup>iii</sup> See: Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets*.

<sup>iii</sup> Webber, “Auschwitz as a Heritage Site,” 123.

<sup>iv</sup> This is true even at the basic level of geography since, as Webber has shown, the topographical area that makes up the current site is only part of what existed in the forties. As Webber puts it, the site has itself ‘been abbreviated as part of the commoditization process.’ See: Webber, “Auschwitz as a Heritage Site,” 122.

<sup>v</sup> Webber, “Auschwitz as a Heritage Site,” 128.

<sup>vi</sup> Cinquegrani, *Journey to Poland*, 159.

<sup>vii</sup> Dwork and van Pelt, “Politics of a Strategy,” 687.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://auschwitz.org/en/history/the-number-of-victims/overall-numbers-by-ethnicity-or-category-of-deportee>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/>

<sup>x</sup> In 2007, the name of the UNESCO entry of the camp was changed from ‘Auschwitz Concentration Camp’ to ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Nazi German Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945).’ The change, instigated jointly by the Polish and Israeli governments, was unanimously approved. The aim was to counter the designation of the site as a ‘Polish extermination camp.’ See: <http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/change-to-the-auschwitz-entry-on-the-unesco-world-heritage-list,450.html>

<sup>xi</sup> Lewin, “The World Heritage Convention,” 682.

<sup>xii</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31>

<sup>xiii</sup> For further discussion on Auschwitz as a heritage site see: Young, *The Texture of Memory*.

<sup>xiv</sup> The concept of *les lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) is from Nora, “Between Memory and History.” For a recent re-evaluation of Nora’s concept, see Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*.

<sup>xv</sup> Auschwitz Memorial Report, 2017. Of these numbers, 81% opted for a tour given by one of the museums 300 educators and guides.

<sup>xvi</sup> See, for example, Cinquegrani, *Journey to Poland*, 182-183; Cole, “(Re)Visiting Auschwitz,” 235, 243.

<sup>xvii</sup> For recent discussions of so-called Holocaust tourism, see: Dalziel, “Romantic Auschwitz”; Reynolds, *Postcards From Auschwitz*; Griffiths, “Encountering Auschwitz”; Reynolds, “Consumers or Witnesses?”

<sup>xviii</sup> Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 111.

<sup>xix</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 133.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 114

<sup>xxi</sup> Dwork and van Pelt, “Politics of a Strategy,” 687

<sup>xxii</sup> Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 97

<sup>xxiii</sup> P.115

<sup>xxiv</sup> P.114

<sup>xxv</sup> Auschwitz Mission Statement. <http://auschwitz.org/en/education/iceah-general-information/mission-statement>

<sup>xxvi</sup> Cole, “(Re)Visiting Auschwitz,” 243

<sup>xxvii</sup> Cited in *The Guardian*, October 11, 2018. [https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/oct/11/chelsea-to-send-racist-fans-auschwitz-instead-banning-orders-antisemitism?CMP=fb\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/oct/11/chelsea-to-send-racist-fans-auschwitz-instead-banning-orders-antisemitism?CMP=fb_gu)

<sup>xxviii</sup> <http://www.dhnet.be/actu/belgique/laurent-louis-condamne-a-visiter-les-camps-de-la-mort-59c234c6cd703b65926f155e>

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxx</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2018/10/10/three-girls-spark-outrage-after-doing-nazi-salutes-outside-auschwitz-8024951/>

<sup>xxxi</sup> For further discussion of the impact of social media, see: Dalziel, “Romantic Auschwitz”; Commene and Potton, “Instagram and Auschwitz.”

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# **‘The Holocaust is a place where . . .’: The position of Auschwitz and the Camp System in English Secondary School Students’ Understandings of the Holocaust.**

## **Abstract:**

This paper presents data drawn from a recent empirical study involving more than 8,000 English secondary school students (aged 11 – 18) who took part in either a survey or focus group interview. It critically examines the significance of Auschwitz and the wider camp system within young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. The paper reflects upon the tension between, on the one hand, academic historians’ requirements of clarity, differentiation and the recognition of both complexity and nuance in making sense of this past, and, on the other, the imprecision, abstraction and/or confusion often associated with, and characteristic of, dominant, Auschwitz-centric narratives of the Holocaust. In doing so it identifies a number of important yet ostensibly widely shared misinterpretations, mistakes and misconceptions reflected in English school students’ engagement with this history.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz; English secondary schools; young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust.

## **Introduction**

Across Europe, North America and beyond, the Holocaust is one of the most regularly referenced and often represented periods of recent human history and, as Dan Stone has noted, ‘in western Europe’ - if not also further afield – ‘our image of the Holocaust centres on Auschwitz-Birkenau.’<sup>i</sup> Indeed, for many, Auschwitz has become *the* symbol of the Holocaust<sup>ii</sup> and, seventy years after



liberation, its arresting graphic vocabulary – of barbed-wired fences and railroad tracks, of shaven heads, tattooed forearms and striped, pyjama-like, uniforms, for example – looms large in the popular imagination, regularly invoked within box-office hit feature films and best-selling novels, through poetry, philosophical and theological writing, through regular museum exhibitions, photography and other visual works of art. However, as recent research conducted by University College London's Centre for Holocaust Education has made clear, popular prominence and widespread familiarity are not necessarily good indicators of phenomena being well understood.<sup>iii</sup> On the contrary, precisely such familiarity can in fact lead to significant *misunderstanding* through the unthinking repetition of misleading simplifications, common misinterpretations and other unwitting distortions of the historical truth. Moreover, as Bloxham and Kushner suggest, where a historical phenomenon acquires 'symbolic,' 'iconic' or, in Tim Cole's language 'mythic' status – as many have argued is the case both for Auschwitz and for the wider Holocaust which it is so commonly taken to represent – the danger of such distortion is even more pronounced.<sup>iv</sup> For icons and symbols derive their value not simply - nor even primarily - from what they may be able to tell today's audience about the past. Rather they acquire or are invested with symbolic status through the resonance of the meanings they are seen to communicate in relation to *contemporary* socio-political values, agendas and concerns. And as the scholar Oren Stier helpfully distinguishes, while a historian might approach the past through disciplinary lenses which seek to differentiate or to clarify and which place enormous value on both specificity and nuance, symbolic currency depends upon simplification, upon the containment or erasure of complexity, and upon abstraction and generalisability.<sup>v</sup>

This paper presents data and analysis drawn from an unprecedentedly large study of English secondary school students' knowledge of the Holocaust. In doing so, it critically considers the status and significance of both Auschwitz and the wider camp system within young people's collective understanding of this history and offers empirically substantiated insight in response to

two, commonly articulated historian's concerns. The first is outlined perhaps most clearly by Kushner et al. when they warn of 'the danger ... that Auschwitz has become so dominant as a metaphor for the "Final Solution" ... that other sites and experiences relating to the Holocaust will be neglected in the popular imagination' leading to a significantly truncated and in important respects misleading engagement with this history.<sup>vi</sup> The second is advanced in detail by Cole who argues that the 'mythical' Auschwitz which exists in popular consciousness is an 'imaginary' 'amalgam' of different places and different time periods that 'draws on the historical camps in Oswiecim, but plays scant regard to [their] historical complexity.'<sup>vii</sup> The paper seeks to answer two principle sets of questions then: 1) to what extent does Auschwitz and the wider camp system feature within English secondary school students' apprehension of the Holocaust and with what consequence? and 2) How much do these same students actually know – or think they know – about Auschwitz itself? How accurate and how detailed is their understanding of its history?

### **Auschwitz and the Holocaust imaginary**

It might at first seem axiomatic that Auschwitz-Birkenau should occupy such a central position within contemporary understandings of and engagements with the Holocaust. Between 1940 and 1945, approximately 1.3 million people were deported to the complex of camps and sub-camps which uniquely comprised both concentration and extermination facilities. Of those, approximately 1.1 million were murdered there. For historian Peter Hayes, '[b]ecause of both the toll it exacted and its sheer physical size, Auschwitz became the very capital of the Holocaust – not its decision-making centre, to be sure, but the place most indelibly linked with all of its multiple dimensions.'<sup>viii</sup> More recently, Nesfield has argued that, '[w]hat Auschwitz-Birkenau as an entire site represents is the Holocaust encapsulated – the final destination of so many victims, Jewish, non-Jewish, political, non-political, from all corners of Europe: those selected for forced labour, and those selected for death.' 'In one respect, then,' she summarises, 'Auschwitz is a multifaceted location ideal for interrogating the scale and breadth of the Holocaust.'<sup>ix</sup>

However, other scholars have both questioned the adequacy of this particular camp system as a short-hand or exemplar of the Holocaust writ large<sup>x</sup> and documented that its present-day prominence as the pre-eminent focal point for this history is itself contingent and was by no means assured. Tim Cole for example, follows Tony Kushner in describing that, immediately following the Second World War ‘Auschwitz simply had no popular resonance in liberal culture’<sup>xi</sup> and up until the 1960s, ‘the name Auschwitz’ was in fact ‘little known in the West.’<sup>xii</sup> Initially, Bergen-Belsen, the first German concentration camp liberated by British troops, was the most commonly shared symbol of Nazi brutality within the United Kingdom while Buchenwald performed a similar function within the US. Cole suggests that it was only during the 70s, 80s and 90s that Auschwitz began to displace these and other camps from popular consciousness internationally and acquired its figurative status as *the* symbol of the Holocaust that it is so widely recognised today.

Because both Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald were concentration camps rather than death camps, it could be argued that Auschwitz is indeed a more appropriate signifier of the systematic, attempted total extermination of European Jews. However, as Lawrence Rees and others have importantly reminded us, for much of its existence, Auschwitz was not principally intended as a death camp whereas four other camps, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka were each constructed with the express and solitary intention of maximising the ‘efficiency’ of mass murder (The Independent, January 9, 2005).<sup>xiii</sup> Through the use of parked gas vans (at Chelmno) and later, purpose-built gas chambers in hidden crematoria, these, often surprisingly small, facilities were together responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1.6 million Jews.<sup>xiv</sup> And yet, while at its peak Sobibor, for example, could facilitate the deaths of over 500 individuals in a single gas chamber in a process that took just 2 – 3 hours from arrival to burial, it is Auschwitz alone that has come to be remembered as the epitome of the bureaucratised, industrial, mass-killing of the Holocaust. Outside of specialist academic communities, these other ‘death factories’ are comparatively little

known. For unlike Auschwitz, they were so successful in their singular purpose – of extermination – that, with only a handful of very unusual exceptions, all who were sent there were almost immediately killed.<sup>xv</sup> At Auschwitz, in contrast, there was an already well-established network of concentration and labour camps which continued to operate alongside the infamous Zyklon-B gas chambers once these became operational. Although staggering numbers of Jews were murdered there, among those chosen to labour rather than face immediate execution, comparatively large numbers were in fact able to survive. As Webber reflects, ‘Auschwitz survivors were thus numerous enough to ensure that their story was told to the world’ (The Guardian, January 13, 2005; para 3) ‘while at a death camp like Belzec’ adds Lawrence Rees, ‘less than 10 former prisoners are thought to have outlived the Nazi regime’ (The Independent, January 9, 2005; para 23).

Moreover, much of Auschwitz itself survived the war intact. Today visitors from across the globe can visit the 191 hectare site which was officially opened as a museum in 1947 and which continues to house 155 original buildings - including barracks, camp blocks and outbuildings - 13 kilometres of rusting fencing, roads, drainage ditches, railway tracks and an unloading platform as well as the visible ruins of its four gas chambers and crematoria (<http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/preservation/>). There are no museums or comparable sites to visit at Belzec, Treblinka or Sobibor: for as Rees explains, ‘the Nazis themselves wanted their names erased from history and sought to ensure that every physical trace of them was removed once they had completed their murderous task’ (The Independent, January 9, 2005; para 8).<sup>xvi</sup>

Arguing powerfully against its dominance as *the* – singular – focus of remembrance and popular understanding of the Holocaust, Snyder has recently suggested that Auschwitz was in fact, ‘a place where the third technique of mass killing was developed, third in chronological order *and also third in significance*.’<sup>xvii</sup> Indeed, for Snyder, even the development of asphyxiation through carbon

monoxide poisoning at Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor or Belzec only represents the second most important development in the mass killing of the Holocaust. For him, 'the most important technique, because it came first, because it killed the most Jews, and because it demonstrated that a Final Solution by Mass Killing was possible, was shooting over pits.'<sup>xviii</sup>

Here Snyder is referring to what Desbois has characterised as 'the Holocaust by Bullets' - that is the shooting at close range of an estimated 1.5 million Jewish people by mobile killing squads, or *Einsatzgruppen*, often supported by local, non-military police officers across the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.<sup>xix</sup> These mass killings were concentrated between 1941 and 1942 but continued throughout the Second World War. Their importance has lead historians such as Snyder, Stone and others to significantly challenge the efficacy and adequacy of 'Auschwitz' as a synonym for the Holocaust as a whole. Stone, for example, urges us to think beyond what he characterises as an 'Auschwitz syndrome':

which has kept us fascinated by the apparent paradox of modern technology being employed in the service of mass murder [and] has stopped us from seeing other aspects of the Holocaust.<sup>xx</sup>

'Auschwitz', he argues clearly, 'is *not* synonymous with the Holocaust *per se*, which was a Europe-wide phenomenon, much of which appears more akin to colonial massacres than to the iconic image of the death camp.'<sup>xxi</sup> In failing to recognise these other forms of killing, our understanding of the Holocaust – and critically, our understanding of both its victims and its perpetrators – is significantly compromised.

### **The position of Auschwitz in contemporary teaching and learning about the Holocaust**

Although they have garnered significant attention within academic discourse, such criticisms and warnings appear to have done little to disrupt the importance still placed upon Auschwitz within

the field of Holocaust education both in the UK and further afield. Since 2007, according to Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website, the site has been visited by more than a million people each year with that number rising to over two million in both 2016 and 2017 (<http://auschwitz.org/en/visiting/attendance/>). Of these, as Nesfield helpfully summarises, ‘70% were classified by the museum as “young people”’ and ‘a majority were organised educational groups, particularly high school, college and university students.’<sup>xxii</sup> While recognising some of the criticisms outlined above and acknowledging that a single site visit cannot ever address the complexity of this history, Nesfield explains that the site remains an attractive – and pragmatic – choice of destination for British teachers and educators seeking ‘an “authentic” educational and historical experience of the Holocaust’ for their students within a manageable amount of time. Since 1999 the Holocaust Educational Trust has taken some 34,000 teachers and secondary school students on 24-hour visits to Poland as part of its flagship *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme. Since 2008, such trips have been supported through funding from UK government (<https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme>).

In addition to those immediately impacted by actual site visits, Auschwitz has also significantly influenced secondary school-aged Britons’ educational encounters with the Holocaust in a variety of other ways over the last four decades. As Pearce documents, Auschwitz was the focus of two of the first touring exhibitions to bring the Holocaust to UK audiences in 1981 and 1983. The second of these, *Auschwitz: An Exhibition*, was intended primarily to reach young audiences and was accompanied by the preparation of a teaching pack, *Auschwitz: Yesterday’s Racism* produced by the Local Education Authority. This proved a very popular resource and was revised for much wider distribution in schools long after the close of the exhibition itself.<sup>xxiii</sup> Auschwitz then came to occupy a physically and symbolically dominant position in the UK’s first permanent exhibition of the Holocaust in London’s Imperial War Museum<sup>xxiv</sup> – again, a large proportion of whose visitors comprise school parties – and, since 2001, in keeping with many other countries, the UK

marks Holocaust Memorial Day – often through school-based and other educational activities – on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, the day of the camp’s liberation.

Prior research also attests to the continuing significance still placed upon Auschwitz within the teaching of the Holocaust in England’s secondary schools. A 2009 research study, for example, asked teachers to identify the individual topics they were most likely to include within a unit of lessons on the Holocaust. 87% of over 1,000 respondents indicated that they were more likely than not to teach about Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was second only to ‘the experiences of individual men, women and children persecuted by the Nazis’ (more likely than not to be taught by 88%). Other topics relevant to the fate of the Jews such as Operation Reinhardt and the *Einsatzgruppen* were likely to be included by a much smaller number of teachers (12% and 20% of respondents respectively).<sup>xxv</sup> Moreover, a recent analysis of 21 history textbooks used within English secondary classrooms reports that Auschwitz continues to feature very commonly in their content and is frequently the main or only example of a camp used.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Although educational encounters with Auschwitz have been the subject of a number of other studies both in Britain and internationally, the focus of most has previously been upon the experiential nature and specific opportunities and challenges of site visits or upon students’ emotional and/or civic engagement with this history.<sup>xxvii</sup> Given the serious concerns outlined by Kushner, Cole, Snyder, Stone and others above, it is perhaps surprising that, to the best of the current authors’ knowledge, the impact of Auschwitz-centric teaching upon young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust has not been the focus of significant empirical study before.

## **Method**

The study from which the findings presented in this paper are drawn was conducted by a team of researchers within the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education who sought to examine what English

secondary school students (aged 11 – 18) know and understand about the Holocaust.<sup>xxviii</sup> The research drew on contributions from more than 8,000 participants making it the largest ever study of its kind. A mixed methodology was employed combining an extensive, 91 question survey-instrument completed by 7,952 students and focus group interviews with a further 244 students.

The participants came from 74 different schools across England. Schools were targeted to ensure the sample was broadly representative of: 1) the number of schools in each of nine government regions; 2) academic performance (as reflected in national examination results); and 3) the composition of different ethnic groups within each region. While a sampling framework was used to identify schools invited to participate, the schools and students who actually took part were volunteers. Students from year groups 7 to 13 took part, with the largest proportion of students in Year 9, the year when the Holocaust is most likely to be taught as part of the History curriculum. Slightly more girls (53%) than boys participated in the research. 73% of the sample were White, 13% were Asian or Asian British, 6% were of Black/African/Caribbean or Black British background and 2% per cent belonged to other ethnic groups.

The data collected from the survey were analysed using SPSS. The survey included three questions requiring free-text responses which were both thematically coded and coded using a numerical framework for inclusion within statistical analyses. 49 focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 244 students (119 girls and 125 boys) from years 7 to 13. Qualitative data were interpretatively coded and emerging themes were compared and contrasted with the findings from the survey.

While the exploration of students' knowledge and understanding of Auschwitz was not an explicit or direct aim of this research, students' responses to a number of key questions asked during both the survey and interviews revealed interesting insights into what secondary school students know

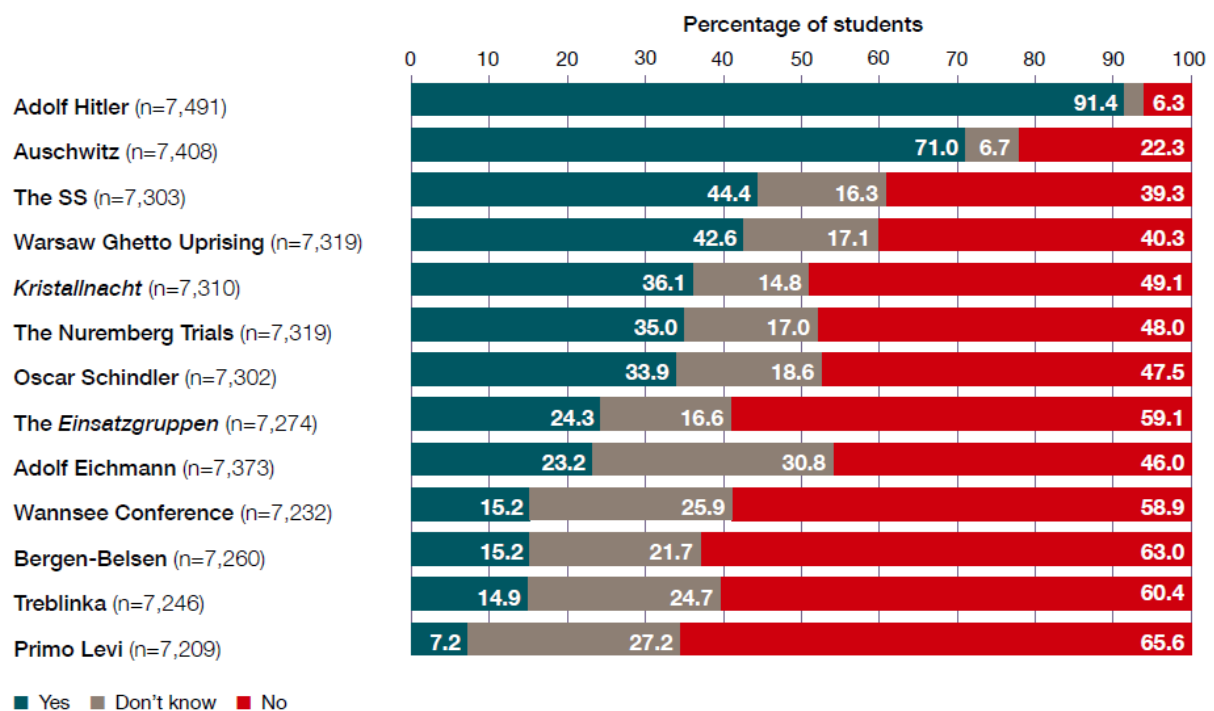


about Nazi camps in general and Auschwitz in particular. The discussion now turns to these findings.

### What prominence is given to Auschwitz and the camp system within English secondary school students' conceptions of the Holocaust?

During analysis of its survey data, the study found evidence of strong recognition of Auschwitz among students. For example, one survey question asked students to indicate whether or not they believed a list of given events, people and places were connected to the Holocaust. As Figure 1 below illustrates, Auschwitz was the second most regularly associated term after 'Adolf Hitler': 71% of survey respondents positively identified Auschwitz with the Holocaust while only 15% of students made the same association with either Bergen-Belsen or Treblinka. Indeed, more students actively rejected the premise that either was in any way related to the Holocaust (63% and 60% of students respectively).

**Figure 1: Students' recognition of people, events and places associated with the Holocaust.**



Elsewhere within the survey, students were presented with photographs and asked to choose from a list of options what they thought each photograph represented. Here again photographs related to Auschwitz were widely recognised. For example, 72 % of respondents recognised the entrance to Auschwitz concentration camp and 87% recognised that the tattoo on a Jewish survivor's arm meant that he had been a prisoner at Auschwitz.

Students who completed the survey were also invited to provide a short description, just one or two sentences long, to indicate what they believed 'the Holocaust' was. 6,133 students provided answers here ranging from single word responses to short paragraphs of up to 250 words. These 'descriptions' were particularly revealing. For while the survey question did not instruct students to demonstrate *everything* they knew about the Holocaust, it did provide an opportunity for them to share their core understanding of this history. Across all 6,133 responses, this translated into an enormous amount of complex data including a wide variety of descriptive, evaluative and 'factual' (as well as counterfactual) content. Through close textual analysis of recurring words, phrases and related terms it was possible to clearly discern the most commonly shared content. Table 1 summarises the ten most frequently occurring words and phrases used by students across all year groups. The term 'camps' was among the top 5 most commonly included in student descriptions among all but the oldest year groups where it was superseded by references to the Second World War.

**Table 1: Approximate frequency counts (freq) of the 10 most commonly appearing words or phrases by year group.**

Rank	Year 7 (n=533)	Year 8 Freq (n=854)	Year 9 Freq (n=2,299)	Year 10 Freq (n=1,074)	Year 11 Freq (n=472)	Year 12/13 Freq (n=862)	Freq
1	Jews/ Jewish	472 Jews/ Jewish	862 Jews/ Jewish	2,346 Jews/ Jewish	1,088 Jews/ Jewish	498 Jews/ Jewish	934
2	Killed	302 Killed	450 Killed	1,258 Killed	638 Killed	271 Killed	384
3	Hitler	232 Hitler	402 Hitler	1,032 Hitler	522 Hitler	230 Hitler	365
4	Camps	167 Camps	293 Camps	741 Camps	336 Nazis	158 Nazis	358
5	Nazis <sup>a</sup>	130 Nazis	211 Nazis	697 Nazis	303 Camps	131 Second World War	214
6	Second World War	125 Second World War	164 Second World War	424 Second World War	178 Million/6 million	92 Camps	205
7	Sent or Taken	98 Sent or Taken	157 Sent or Taken	355 Million/6 million	161 Germany	88 Germany	198
8	Germans <sup>b</sup>	91 Gassed	154 Germans	336 Sent or Taken	156 Second World War	78 Genocide	196
9	Gassed <sup>c</sup>	68 Germans	143 Million/6 million	317 Race/racism/ethnicity	146 Race/racism/ethnicity	77 Million/6 million	161
10	Religion <sup>d</sup>	43 Million/6 million	92 Gassed	300 Homosexuals	133 Homosexuals	60 Race/racism/ethnicity	153

a Count includes references to: 'Nazis', 'Nazi party', 'Nazi Germans' and 'Nazi regime'

b Count includes 'German people'

c Count includes all references to 'gas' and 'gassing' (including 'gas chambers' and 'gas showers')

d Count includes references to 'religious' and 'beliefs'

Across all students' descriptions, 56 individual references were made to Auschwitz or Auschwitz-Birkenau. This might ostensibly seem like a very small number but it is important to note that only 15% of students included any kind of geographical reference point at all within their short descriptions (this compares to 74% of students who included identification of at least one perpetrator, 92% at least one victim and 93% at least one action within their account<sup>xxix</sup>).

With regard to *how* Auschwitz was framed within these 56 short descriptions, the place name was most commonly presented as 'the main camp' or as an exemplar ('like' or 'such as') that students were able to identify as, for example, among the students who wrote:

The Holocaust was when 6 million Jews were killed in so many horrible ways. Some were kept in concentration camps, the main one was in Auschwitz. Germans took Jews from their homes and put them in the ghetto. Soon afterwards started the massacre of the ghetto where most of

Jews were wiped out. Survivors were put in concentration camps. (Year 9 student).

In WW2 Hitler wanted to kill all Jews and people he thought was 'incorrect' and 'wrong' so he sent them all on over-crowded trains to camps like Auschwitz to be gassed and killed. (Year 9 student)

An attempt made by the Nazi party in Germany to wipe out and commit genocide against the Jews. The Nazis also killed disabled people. To do this the Nazis used gas chambers and concentration camps, an example of this was Auschwitz run by Rudolf Hoess. (Year 10 student)

The attempted mass extermination of a number of peoples by Nazi Germany, including Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals. It took place during the Second World War and for the victims it often involved imprisonment in concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau until the victims were gassed. (Year 12 student).

For other students however, there appeared to be greater confusion and the connotations most feared by Stone, Snyder and others more fully realised:

Adolf Hitler dictator of Germany in the 30s and 40s tried to wipe out the Jewish race and religion in concentration camps called Auschwitz-Birkenau . . . (extract from Year 9 student description).

It was where all the Germans took all the Jews to a place called Auschwitz to then separate them to see who would die straight away or who would be worked to death. When they were killed, thousands of

people were put into a tiny gas chamber and gassed to death for no reason.

(Year 11 student).

The Holocaust was the mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, Romanians and other ethnic groups in a camp called Auschwitz, during the Second World War. (Year 9 student).

While these examples, which very explicitly reduce the totality of the Holocaust to one named camp, were very infrequent and more common among the younger students surveyed, a closely related tendency to equate or conflate the Holocaust with a more generalised notion of ‘the camps’ or ‘concentration camps’ was much more pronounced. Exploring the detail behind the frequency with which the term ‘camp(s)’ was deployed in student descriptions (as already indicated in Table 1), the dominance and impact of a somewhat imprecise and often rather muddled notion of the camp system in student thinking becomes more clear. More than any other single word or phrase used by students in their descriptions, the association between ‘camps’ – and in particular ‘concentration camps’ and/or ‘gas camps’ – and the Holocaust was so strong that, in a number of cases, they were presented as though synonymous:

Holocaust is a concentration camp for Jews (Year 9 student).

The Holocaust was the concentration camp within the world wars that Jews would be sent to work as slaves and eventually be gassed to death (Year 13 student).

[The Holocaust is] otherwise referred to as the concentration camps. These were built during the second world war by the Nazis in which they imprisoned Jews, Blacks, gays and disabled there to work and build more of the camp and then they would put the ones that could no longer work

into a gas chamber where they were gassed until no one in there was alive  
(Year 9 student).

[The Holocaust was] a gas camp the Germans controlled to kill Jewish  
people (Year 10 student).

In other examples the conflation was not quite so explicit but nonetheless remained significant as, for example where the Holocaust was described as ‘a place’ with pronounced concentration camp-like features and purpose, or where the verb ‘concentrating’ was invented to become the principle action of the Holocaust:

[The Holocaust was] the Nazi way of killing all Jews by *concentrating*  
them into fortified camps to do hard labour or be killed (Year 9 student,  
emphasis added).

It is instructive to note that Kucia reports a similar conflation of ‘the Holocaust’ *as* a concentration or ‘annihilation camp’ among 4% of the Polish students he surveyed within a 2000 study.<sup>xxx</sup>

Figure 2 summarises all of the most frequently occurring words used where students made reference to actions undertaken during the Holocaust within their short descriptions. The nouns ‘concentration camp’ and ‘death camp’ are included here to reflect the regularity with which they were used alongside various verbs such as ‘sent to,’ ‘taken,’ ‘imprisoned’ and/or ‘created.’ Taken as a whole, this figure is unlikely to do much to assuage the fears of Snyder in his insistence that, ‘The image of the German concentration camps as the worst element of National Socialism is an illusion, a dark mirage over an unknown desert’ for ‘the vast majority of Jews killed in the Holocaust never saw a concentration camp.’<sup>xxxii</sup> His concern that the large number of Jews killed by bullets have been ‘largely forgotten’<sup>xxxiii</sup> certainly seems to be borne out in the comparative prevalence of terms such as ‘gas,’ ‘gassed’ and/or ‘gas chambers’ in student descriptions (in total,



## **What do young people actually know and understand about Auschwitz and the wider camp system?**

In general terms and as may readily be apparent within the small number of examples already provided, students' free-text descriptions of the Holocaust indicated that while the *idea* of a concentration camp was familiar to most students and awarded central significance by many, this was not always underpinned by very comprehensive understanding.

In 120 student responses, there was some recognition that different types of camps existed, but, in the majority of the descriptions provided, no such distinction was apparent. Instead, most students appeared to operate with a more monolithic conception of 'the camps' – or, in a number of cases, 'the camp' singular – as prison-like places where victims were 'brutally' 'beaten,' 'burned,' 'starved,' 'tortured' or 'punished.' It should be additionally mentioned that, while the majority of students who provided descriptions of the Holocaust appeared to understand camps as places of death, for a smaller but nonetheless significant number, the whole camp system was presented as though the enslavement and forced labour of victims was its primary – in some cases exclusive – function. For example:

When the Nazis (in WW2) captured slaves (Jews mainly) and made them produce weapons until they died of either lack of nutrition or exhaustion (Year 9 student).

I think Holocaust is a place that the Germans took their slaves in the world war. I believe it was just Jewish people they took there (Year 9 student).

The Holocaust was when Hitler kept the Jews in slavery (Year 9 student).



In many of these accounts, the actual killing of Jews or other victims was not even mentioned while in others, students only appeared to recognise the deaths of those who were ‘too old or too weak’ (Year 9 student) to work:

A Holocaust was a place where all the Jews had to go when they was either old, too young or had a disability. Hitler was the one that said the Jews had to go into the Holocaust. Only the healthy Jews was allowed to stay alive (Year 10 student).

Students’ descriptions also commonly revealed confusion over the identities and various fates of the different victim groups targeted by the Nazis. While Jews were the primary victim group most readily identified within most students’ understandings of both the camp system and the wider Holocaust, a large number appeared to collapse the experiences of Jews with those of various others such as ‘Blacks, gays and disabled’ as in one of the examples already presented above. While student confusion over the differential fates and specific targeting of different communities is discussed in much further detail in Foster *et al.*, it is worth noting here that this finding talks directly to Cole’s warning that, ‘the blurring of distinct camps’ necessary for the creation of a ‘mythic’ ‘single, imaginary “Auschwitz”’ ‘results in the homogenisation of the “Auschwitz prisoner” [and] tends to down play the particularity of those imprisoned and murdered in the individual camps.’<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The primacy of Auschwitz in students’ thinking, as well of some of the reasons and consequences for this, was further reinforced within focus group interviews. Here again, Auschwitz was considered the ‘main one’ or, as John (a Year 9 student) explained, ‘the main one you get taught.’ Matt (another Year 9 student) offered an alternative rationale for camp’s dominance in students’ thinking: ‘The main one that everyone knows of is Auschwitz because that was where the gas chambers were.’

That Matt locates the gas chambers exclusively within Auschwitz was indicative of the wider suggestion that many students knew very little, if anything, about the existence and function of other camps and crucially, the other extermination camps of Chelmno, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor or Majdanek. This was borne out in both interviews and survey responses. Although a couple of younger students hinted at the existence of ‘other camps,’ no students below Years 12 and 13 were able to name a camp other than Auschwitz in interview.

And although both the survey and interview data suggested that most students ‘know about’ Auschwitz, when we examined interview data more closely, the picture became more complicated. The quotes below provide examples of a number of problems in students’ understanding about Auschwitz.

*Interviewer:* When you think about the Holocaust where are you thinking of? Where did this happen?

*Megan:* Auschwitz.

*Interviewer:* And Auschwitz is what?

*Megan:* It's a concentration camp or a death camp. Mainly Germany.

(Extract from interview with year 9 students)

Auschwitz was actually hidden from everybody in the more outskirts, not the outskirts, but in Germany, but in a small area of Germany (Chloe, Year 9).

The first potentially concerning misunderstanding illustrated here was the misapprehension among some students that Auschwitz was located within Germany instead of in pre-war Polish territory annexed to the Reich. This reflects a wider impoverished understanding of the geography, scope and scale of the Holocaust shared by many students and articulated in various ways throughout

the 2016 study and the German-centrism characteristic of many of their accounts.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The second is the common confusion – or possible conflation – of Auschwitz as ‘a concentration camp *or* a death camp’ although it is not possible to tell whether this particular student believes both terms refer to the same thing or is recognising their own confusion in relation to the multifarious functions of Auschwitz throughout its history.

Finally, there is the problematic, erroneous and yet, among students very widespread, notion that Auschwitz – and by extension much of the action of the Holocaust – operated in secret and was well hidden. Again, this was a misconception very commonly articulated during interview among students who reasoned that ‘ordinary Germans’ – let alone ‘ordinary’ Poles, Belarussians or Ukrainians, for example, who were entirely absent from such accounts – were unaware of the extreme horrors of the Holocaust because the mass killings were carried out in remote locations and purposely hidden from view. Such misconceptions have considerable implication for students’ understanding of issues of agency and responsibility.

Further insights into understandings of Auschwitz came out of another exchange with Year 9 students about the very nature of a concentration camp:

*Tim:* Didn’t they make them all work there really hard and  
it was mainly like a prison for them; make them work  
and ...

*Catherine:* Hardly any food.

*Tim:* Just ... nothing.

*Interviewer:* So tough conditions ... but earlier we said they got  
gassed and killed.

*Tim:* Yeah. It is sort of ...

*Interviewer:* So is it both?

*Catherine:* Didn't they use them and use the ladies for prostitution, and then when they got bad or old or weak, then they killed them. When they were useless.

*Harry:* The men were used for, like, builders and ...like really hardly ... like other people didn't need ...

*Catherine:* I think the women and the children got killed first.

*Interviewer:* So some people got killed almost straight away?

*Catherine:* The weaker ones. But if they were strong and capable ...And the old ones, yes.

*Tim:* Yeah. If they were strong and capable then they would be used to provide a purpose.

*Interviewer:* Is there a difference between a concentration camp and a death camp?

*Catherine:* I think they're the same.

(Extract from interview with year 9 students).

The inability to differentiate between camps established for different purposes, is again clearly shown throughout this quote and especially in the last statement. This interview also exemplifies one further misconception that a large number of students had: the notion that concentration camps were like prisons. One consequence of this may be that, in attempting to explain how or why someone might end up in a concentration camp, students might presume that the victim bore some responsibility for their imprisonment or it may lead them to assume that there was some due process of law.

## **Conclusion and implications**

Auschwitz has ... become the standard shorthand of the Holocaust because, when treated in a certain mythical and reductive way, it seems to separate the mass murder of Jews from human choices and actions.<sup>xxxv</sup>

This paper opened with reference to concerns regularly articulated by academic historians and other scholars that the over-reliance or over-emphasis on Auschwitz as *the* singular symbol of the Holocaust could lead to significant distortions in our understanding of and engagement with this history. It is important to emphasise that such warnings were not borne simply out of historical pedantry. Rather they reflect concern regarding the meanings derived by, or in another vernacular the ‘lessons’ potentially learned from – or at least engaged with – contemporary audiences’ encounters with this history. If, for example a young person believes that the majority of the mass killings committed during the Holocaust were conducted in a hidden manner, largely unbeknownst to ‘ordinary’ civilians or with a distance created between the perpetrator as bureaucrat, just playing their part in a systematic and depersonalised ‘industrial’ genocide, this has rather different implication for questions related to complicity and responsibility than the recognition that vast numbers of victims were shot at close quarters with the full cognisance – and in many cases, practical collaboration – of various local communities. Likewise, if the horrors of the Holocaust are kept largely contained within one, singular, ‘mythic’ and in many respects abstracted location, they are much easier to distance from our sense of selves – our sense of humanity and of modern European society.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In this respect then, it should be of considerable concern, not only to academic historians but also to all those truly committed to robust educational encounters with the Holocaust that the data presented within this paper and drawn from extensive empirical research in England’s secondary classrooms so clearly evidences so many of the exactly same distortions, misconceptions and omissions that the authors whose work opened the paper feared.

For in answer to the questions that opened this paper, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's research with English secondary schools students suggests: 1) that both Auschwitz and the wider camp system continue to exert considerable influence over school students' understandings of the Holocaust, emphasising the experiences of some victims and actions undertaken by some perpetrators while almost entirely displacing those of many more; and 2) that in spite of this widespread familiarity, very few students were able to display significant or detailed understanding of the complex history of Auschwitz itself nor its relationship to the wider camp system. Instead most relied upon and reproduced a somewhat abstract and in many cases rather confused conception of Auschwitz as a singular, generic and multi-functioning 'concentration-death-camp' with the particularity of the various subcamps and the specificity of various groups imprisoned and those murdered there significantly blurred.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Stone, 'Beyond the Auschwitz Syndrome', 456.

<sup>ii</sup> Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*; Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

<sup>iii</sup> Foster *et al.*, *What do students know?*; Pettigrew *et al.*, *Teaching about the Holocaust*.

<sup>iv</sup> Bloxham and Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*; Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*. See also Young, *The Texture of Memory*; Wollaston, *Sharing Sacred Space?*; Stier, *Holocaust Icons*.

<sup>v</sup> Stier, *Holocaust Icons*.

<sup>vi</sup> Kushner *et al.*, 'Approaching Belsen: An Introduction', 7.

<sup>vii</sup> Cole, *Images*, 105.

<sup>viii</sup> Hayes, 'Auschwitz: Capital of the Holocaust', 331.

<sup>ix</sup> Nesfield, 'Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant', 47.

<sup>x</sup> See, for example, Webber, Jonathan. 'Why Here?' *The Guardian*, January 13, 2005.

<sup>xi</sup> Kushner, 'The Memory of Belsen', 188.

<sup>xii</sup> Cole, *Images*, 99.

<sup>xiii</sup> Extermination facilities were also built and, for a short time, used at a fifth site, Majdanek although, like Auschwitz, this was initially constructed as a concentration camp facility.

<sup>xiv</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

<sup>xv</sup> Capland and Wachsmann, *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany*.

<sup>xvi</sup> See also Capland and Wachsmann, *Concentration Camps*.

<sup>xvii</sup> Snyder, *Black Earth*, 209, (emphasis added).

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets*.

<sup>xx</sup> Stone, 'Beyond the Auschwitz Syndrome', 457.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., emphasis added.

<sup>xxii</sup> Nesfield, 'Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant', 44.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness*.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Lawson, “Ideology in a Museum of Memory”.

<sup>xxv</sup> Pettigrew *et al.*, *Teaching About the Holocaust*.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Foster and Karayianni, “Portrayals of the Holocaust”.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See, for example, the works by Forges (1999), Fuchs (2003), Shechter and Salomon (2005), Pampel (2007), Kverndokk (2011), Cowan and Maitles (2011) and Cohen (2013) all cited in Eckmann *et al.*, *Dialogue Beyond Borders*.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Foster *et al.*, *What do students know?*

<sup>xxix</sup> For a much fuller account of these and other findings see Foster *et al.*, *What do students know?*, 37-69.

<sup>xxx</sup> Kucia, *Holocaust Sites, Relics, Representations, and Memory*.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 282.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Snyder, *Black Earth*, 207.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Cole, *Images*, 107.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Foster *et al.* *What do students know?*

<sup>xxxv</sup> Snyder, *Black Earth*, 208.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See also Dwork and Van Pelt, *Auschwitz*.

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# Site-seeing: Reflections on Visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum with Teenagers

**Abstract to be added**

**Keywords to be added (ed.)**

Auschwitz was never meant to be visited, yet in 2017 the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum received around 2.1 million visitors – the largest number to date and the result of a four-fold increase in visitor numbers over the previous two decades.<sup>i</sup> Many of these visitors were school pupils, evidently between the ages of 14-18,<sup>ii</sup> engaging in educational excursions with their teachers or youth leaders. This paper considers some of the issues that might be considered when visiting the museum with pupils of this age, within the wider context of ‘dark tourism’ and the management of difficult heritages in Poland.<sup>iii</sup> It considers preliminary research undertaken with the Holocaust Educational Trust on their *Lessons from Auschwitz* project (<https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme/about-lfa>) as an example of good practice to prompt and provoke further research and discussion. These considerations are based on the author’s experience as a researcher within the field of Holocaust Education, as a former schoolteacher, and as an educator on the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project.

## **(Dark) Tourism in Poland – preserving history and memory.**

The term ‘dark tourism’ was first used in 1996 to describe ‘a fundamental shift in the way in which death, disaster and atrocity are being handled by those who offer associated tourism “products.”’<sup>iv</sup> Poland’s economy continues to benefit from a growing tourism industry (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/413249/number-of-arrivals-spent-in-short-stay-accommodation-in-poland/>), and undoubtedly part of this

industry centres around activities which can be classified as ‘dark tourism’ because of their connections with the country’s wartime past.<sup>v</sup> This is inevitably an uneasy relationship between past and present, where difficult heritages intersect with commercial realities in a collision of potentially opportunistic pseudo-Judaica. In Kraków for example, souvenir shops and stalls sell caricatured pasts of the Jewish history of the town, while museums, memorials and restaurants all contribute further to this clichéd veneer. The active Jewish population of Krakow now numbers a few hundred, and there are only a handful of synagogues in regular use, while Kazimierz itself has been redeveloped as a vibrant cultural hub. A beneficiary of cheap airline connections and a magnet for stag and hen parties, Kraków presents itself as a fusion of histories, cultures and faiths, yet the country’s official tourism and information portal (<https://poland.pl>, managed by the Republic of Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs) underplays the darker side of its recent history. That the Ministry wish to foreground Polish history before and beyond occupation and persecution is entirely understandable, but these prevailing contemporary presentations disguise what has at times been a ‘bitter controversy’ over ‘the ongoing legacy of Auschwitz’ and its associated history post-liberation.<sup>vi</sup>

The development of Nazi-era sites in Poland has been somewhat necessarily ad-hoc. Attempts at co-ordination have been frustrated by disputes over ownership of land, looted property, and – most problematically – memory, and how most appropriately to commemorate what was lost.<sup>vii</sup> An example of this is the site of the former Chełmno extermination camp (<https://chelmno-muzeum.eu/en/>). The site’s misappropriation over several decades has resulted in a *mélange* of memorials that struggle to present a coherent narrative for visitors, and that impede archaeological work at the site.<sup>viii</sup> The Chełmno site illustrates the enormity of the undertaking facing those tasked with

preserving and presenting such places across Poland and explains the diversity of their current presentations. Some of these places have remained unmarked, others have been nominally defined to indicate their pasts, others have been more explicitly marked or commemorated, while others still have attempted at recreation or reconstruction. Marking and defining these sites for future generations has been a complex and exhausting undertaking, and one which will always be necessarily incomplete.

### **Auschwitz Birkenau – a site of history, a site of memory**

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum arguably embodies *all* of these approaches. While its attempts to meet a variety of needs as a memorial, as a museum, and as an authentic site might appear contradictory, the museum publicly states that it ‘in fact fulfils all of these functions, as they do not cancel out, but rather complement one another,’<sup>ix</sup> and it is certainly not the only historic site confronting such issues.<sup>x</sup> Parts of it remain relatively unmarked (such as the extensive mass graves at the back of Birkenau) while other parts are nominally defined (such as the photograph illustrating where the camp orchestra played at the entrance to Auschwitz I). The memorial at the end of the rail tracks at Birkenau more explicitly marks and commemorates the final journey for so many of the victims. Then there is evidence of recreation and reconstruction in the crematoria at Auschwitz I,<sup>xi</sup> and more recently in the iconic ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ sign above the entrance gate, following the theft and subsequent recovery of the original in 2009.

Established as a museum in 1947, the first exhibits detailed the experience of Polish prisoners through objects such as photographs of inmates, their stolen possessions, and the detritus of industrialised murder (such as the display of discarded Zyklon B cans).<sup>xii</sup> The original museum reflected communist anti-Fascist narratives,<sup>xiii</sup> but following the

country's democratic transition from 1989, the museum exhibits have refocused from the Polish narrative towards the Judeocide perpetrated primarily at Birkenau (and this is where its emphasis has remained). As such it has come to symbolise *different* things at *different* times, for *different* audiences. This has enabled, 'Auschwitz, and the Holocaust in general, [to] become part of almost everyone's 'memory'... It necessarily escapes, therefore, from any single interpretation, any one 'truth,' and has to adapt to the needs of many different groups.'<sup>xiv</sup> This has been evident since the site was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. At the time it was defined as being 'directly or tangibly associated with events... of outstanding universal significance' under Criteria VI (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>), and was recognised as bearing 'irrefutable evidence to one of the greatest crimes ever perpetrated against humanity' (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31>). Further, the citation acknowledged how the site was 'a place of memory' and 'of transmission to future generations and a sign of warning.' That this site has been called upon to perform so many functions has been a cause of dispute since its foundation.<sup>xv</sup> Consequently, 'Auschwitz' is well known, yet often misunderstood. Yet, as arguably the fulcrum of Holocaust memory,<sup>xvi</sup> *how* and *what* is presented at Auschwitz-Birkenau defines global Holocaust memory and is under constant and intense scrutiny. It 'represents perhaps one of the greatest dilemmas for interpretation'<sup>xvii</sup> as it is a site that both presents and *represents* history – the former mediated through rigorous academic enquiry, while the latter is a mediation between the site and the visitor. It is a consideration of this mediation – particularly for younger visitors – that will be the focus now of this paper.

### **Visiting with school pupils from the UK – a case study**

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (to give it its official title) welcomes thousands of visitors every day and many of these are school pupils on organised educational tours. Some visit as part of their studies in history, some visit with various youth, religious, or community groups. Affordable flights in and out of nearby airports mean that like most other visitors they mainly arrive on coaches and rarely stay in the locality for longer than a day.

It can be argued that the UK is not a case representative of these various groups and I fully acknowledge and accept this criticism.<sup>xviii</sup> The UK's relationship with the Holocaust is materially different from that of our European neighbours. It did not happen on British soil, although the Channel Islands were occupied and prisoners were deported from the labour camp there on Alderley. However, since there is no single narrative of the Holocaust it cannot be said to have happened in a particular, universal manner *anywhere*. Different countries across Europe experienced the Holocaust in diverse, often unique ways. Consequently, any case study will be as universally applicable as it is inadequate. What is offered here is a consideration of an educational programme in *one* European country as it attempts to help its young people better understand the events of the Holocaust through visits to the site at the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum.

The curriculum in schools has been a matter of devolved government policy within the constituent countries of the UK for many years. While there is no specific requirement for pupils in Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland to study the events of the Holocaust, pupils in England study it as part of a compulsory unit of the National Curriculum for History.<sup>xix</sup> Whilst not all schools are required to follow this programme (due to local funding arrangements for schools), the majority do. Consequently, British pupils tend

to learn about the events of the Holocaust in History lessons, usually between the ages of 13-14.<sup>xx</sup> The Holocaust Educational Trust (<https://www.het.org.uk>) was established in 1988 by two prominent parliamentarians, in response to the draft proposals for a new National Curriculum (and the debate surrounding the inclusion, or not, of the Holocaust as a topic within the documentation). The Trust's flagship programme is the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project (<https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme>), open to all 17-18 year-olds in schools and funded by the devolved governments in the UK's component countries. Each project consists of four parts:

- An Orientation Seminar
- A one-day visit to Poland
- A Follow Up Seminar
- A 'Next Steps' project

Each pair of participants from a school or college works in a group of around 20 young people led by an experienced Holocaust Educational Trust Educator, possibly joined by a handful of other teachers, or guests such as local newspaper reporters or politicians. Each project takes around 220 people ('participants') on a chartered flight to Poland and there are 15 such flights each year. Since its inception in 1998, the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project has taken over 37,000 young people to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. The British were the second largest national group of visitors to the museum in 2017,<sup>xxi</sup> and the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project is the largest of its kind in the country.

### **Research rationale and methodology**

I have been an Educator on the *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme for six years. During this time, I have accompanied hundreds of young people and teachers on their

visits to Poland. Anecdotally, we frequently hear of the impact participants feel their involvement has had on them. Some even go so far as to say it was a ‘life changing’ experience. This prompted us to consider how we could explore that experience with participants before, during and beyond their visit to Poland. This article presents findings from the initial small-scale research project undertaken during one *Lessons from Auschwitz* visit to Poland, which has subsequently informed a larger-scale project, currently on-going. For the purpose of clarity in this paper, the word ‘Educator’ (demarcated by a capital letter) will be used to describe a freelance educator employed by the Holocaust Educational Trust, as opposed to any other teacher / educator. The word ‘student’ will be used when referencing those 17 year-olds who agreed to take part in this research study, as opposed to participants more generally on this *Lessons from Auschwitz* visit.

This research builds on my previous work exploring the role of emotion in classroom-based Holocaust Education,<sup>xxii</sup> my experiences as an Educator on the project, and recent research in the UK around Holocaust Education and visitors’ experiences at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.<sup>xxiii</sup> Drawing from these studies, it adopts a constructivist methodology, with the underlying assumption that people’s experiences of the site will be co-constructed in the nexus formed amidst their social lives, their personal and familial histories, the site itself, and the various forms of mediated memory they encounter at the site and beyond.

This small study involved twelve, 17-year-old student participants on a *Lessons from Auschwitz* project day trip to Poland, from the north of England. They represent a small, purposive sample from whom voluntary, informed consent was sought prior to the day visit to Poland.<sup>xxiv</sup> During the visit I accompanied their group as a participant observer,



not their Educator (although I clearly self-identified to the students as both a researcher and Educator from the outset, in the interests of avoiding deception).<sup>xxv</sup> The students were interviewed using a semi-structured instrument,<sup>xxvi</sup> aimed at exploring their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the site as the day visit progressed. Interviews were conducted at opportune moments during the day, when they were not actively engaged in educational activities. I also felt it was inappropriate to conduct interviews whilst on site at the museum, out of respect both for the site and the students' privacy during what can be a very challenging encounter with the place.<sup>xxvii</sup> Preliminary findings are presented here within the context of a wider discussion around the purposes of the project. Finally, implications for practice are considered, alongside implications for the next stage of this research.

### **Students' experiences on a *Lessons from Auschwitz* day visit to Poland**

- Students' motivations for visiting

Participants are selected to represent their school or college on a *Lessons from Auschwitz* project in a variety of ways, often by application letter to their co-ordinating teacher.<sup>xxviii</sup> Some are studying history, but many are not. Whether they would regard themselves as historians, pilgrims, tourists, or just curious visitors will depend on their motivations for coming. Similarly, individuals cannot necessarily know how others (even within their own group) see themselves in this respect. Consequently, school groups are likely to consist of pupils who are visiting in various ways. While the majority will no-doubt be interested in learning more about the site's history, there are certain to be pupils with a variety of undisclosed personal histories and familial hinterlands that cause them to interact with the site in different, intimately personal ways. During the coach journey from the airport to Oświęcim, the students were asked

why they had wanted to come to this place. None expressed a particular reason beyond simply ‘wanting’ to go. However, one elaborated that ‘I can’t really say exactly why I wanted to go. I just know I wanted to see it. I’ve heard so much about it, I want to see it in real life.’ At the start of this article I asserted that ‘Auschwitz was never meant to be visited.’ This was because Auschwitz is not there; the Auschwitz of today is *not* the Auschwitz of the 1940s. Indeed, the museum itself refers to today’s visitors ‘visiting the post-camp space’ – a specific choice of words differentiating what *is*, from what *was*.<sup>xxix</sup> It is important therefore, to make this distinction clear for young visitors to the museum. What they experience on their day visit is not (and can never be) an authentic experience of the camp. Rather, they are visiting a geographic site of a historic past – the ‘post-camp space’ rather than the ‘real life’ the student, above, expected. They are engaging with authentic objects as presented for mass consumption, and for the better comprehension of the incomprehensible. One of the other students was more clear about this distinction; referring back to having heard a survivor during their Orientation Seminar a week earlier, he considered that although he might ‘go home now and I’ll be like oh yes, I’ve been to Auschwitz,’ he appreciated that ‘you haven’t really... you’ve visited what was.’

- The Holocaust as an individualised event

Participants raised the issue of the Holocaust as an *individualised* event on several occasions during the interviews. At the Orientation Seminar they had heard from a Jewish survivor of Bergen-Belsen, whose testimony they had listened to for around an hour followed by an opportunity to ask questions. Young people today live at the close of ‘the Era of the Witness,’ so this opportunity is an increasingly rare and valuable one,<sup>xxx</sup> affording them far more than passive engagement with a recorded text (which ‘cannot be compared to seeing and hearing a survivor or eyewitness face to face’).<sup>xxxi</sup>

As one student put it, ‘obviously it does have more of an impact when the survivor’s there, talking to you directly.’

Clearly the experience of hearing directly from a survivor resonated with the students on this visit itself, in terms of their identification with the individual within the wider event. As one said, ‘everybody had a life, everybody had a dream. They were all individuals... they all had their own lives.’ This evidently particularly struck them in Block 6 at Auschwitz I, where photographs of prisoners line the walls showing each individual’s name, profession, date of entry and date of death. The brevity of their survival ‘shocked’ several of the students, leaving one to reflect that ‘the fact that anybody survived Auschwitz is just amazing.’

- The sites – Oświęcim

Upon arrival in Poland on their day visit, participants visit a site of pre-war Jewish life in Oświęcim, such as the site of the former Great Synagogue. Although time can sometimes be short, it is an important part of the programme that participants spend time considering the pre-war community context in-country. Here, they have the opportunity to engage with the town as it *is*, as well as reflecting on the town as it *was*. The Jewish population of the town (which pre-war outnumbered its Christians neighbours)<sup>xxxii</sup> is present now only in its absence. Local people go about their everyday business, challenging the young people to consider complex issues of memory, in time and space. It was quiet in the town centre on the day of this visit, causing one student to observe that ‘it doesn’t feel like there’s much going on. It feels like we’re in the middle of nowhere.’ Yet they were also drawn to consider the geographic location of the place within the wider country – ‘it’s just so big... everything must be far to get to, like you couldn’t just walk anywhere that you needed to go, you’d have to drive.’ These

observations also challenged them to consider their own position within the rehearsal of memory (and the impact of their presence as ‘tourists’ on the local town and its population). Although the focus of this part of the visit is undoubtedly on celebrating the richness of pre-war life, this can make for an uncomfortable starting point as participants begin to attempt to locate themselves physically within a temporal and geographical memory space. If young people aren’t given this opportunity to locate the town in these manifold modes, then their Educators risk presenting them simply with a version of what Cole has critically called an ‘Auschwitz-land’ which ‘threatens to trivialise the past, domesticate the past, and ultimately jettison the past all together.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> With young people, dislocating the past from the present, risks nullifying it altogether.

- The sites – Auschwitz I

The scene that confronts the participants upon arrival at Auschwitz I can be strangely perplexing. For school pupils the Auschwitz that they are familiar with (from text books and films – the one whose name has come to be ‘the byword for the epitome of inhumanity and barbarism’),<sup>xxxiv</sup> does not correlate with the tourist-centric scene before them. The various information boards, kiosks, and administrative cabins obscure the entrance, with hotels and other eateries visible across the road. In busy periods, the atmosphere is anything but sombre.<sup>xxxv</sup> The contradiction that exists between young people’s expectations and the reality of the point of arrival can be stark. It is only once they have passed through the main entrance that they get their first view of the inside of the camp and the already familiar ‘Arbeit Macht Frei Gate.’ Passing through the gate is ‘a liminal moment, marking the descent into memory,’<sup>xxxvi</sup> which can be immensely challenging for young people – indeed for any visitor. This is also the point at which they begin to engage with their museum guide. The museum regards visiting with one of their approved guides as being ‘the most valuable form of learning the history of the

camp.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Generally speaking, the students agreed with this assumption, with one remarking they felt it really ‘makes a difference.’ There are over 300 museum-trained guides who work at the site in a freelance capacity, providing education in around 20 languages. The Holocaust Educational Trust tend to work with a small group of these guides, who have a better understanding of the *Lessons from Auschwitz* program – particularly how to work in collaboration with the Trust’s Educators who deliver various inputs on-site during the tour. This is a partnership that has been developed and nurtured over many years in cooperation with the museum. So it is that participants begin to move from one place to the next (often without conversation), as they are sheltered within their own thoughts by the headphones through which the museum guides provide their expert and thorough commentary.

Throughout their shared time in these exhibits at Auschwitz I, Educators continue to provide educational input in tandem with the museum guides, alongside on-going pastoral support for the group. The collective narrative presented by the museum is both multi-layered and necessarily oversimplified. Consequently, the guides endeavour to present an account that is digestibly understandable, whilst remaining ultimately at the limits of comprehension. This led some of the students to see their guide’s role as very factual. As one said, ‘the way the guides delivered the information was very black and white; this is what happened, this is what happened, this is what happened.’ Whilst they undoubtedly found their guide’s inputs valuable in this way, another questioned ‘whether it’s meant to be that way [so matter-of-fact], just so that we realise how bad it really was?’ The presence of the Educator means that participants are able to explore issues raised, ask questions or receive support in ways that would not be possible in other anonymous groups on other tours with the same guides. For example, the brief time on the coach transferring from Auschwitz I to Birkenau offers welcome respite for

the young people, time to reflect and ask questions, and for their Educators to ensure their well-being.

Constraints of time necessitate that almost all visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum see only a small fraction of the exhibits open to the public. Participants on a typical *Lessons from Auschwitz* project enter Auschwitz I through the Arbeit Macht Frei gate, then head to Block 4. This block details the scale of the extermination perpetrated by the Nazis, through photographic and documentary evidence. It variously presents both the methods of killing, and the consequences. Upstairs in the block, a single dimly lit room houses nearly two tonnes of female victims' hair, illustrating both the human cost and the industrial scale of the Nazis' actions. Next door, Block 5 presents further material evidence of their crimes; looted glasses, Tallitot, prostheses, pots and pans, shoes, suitcases, shaving brushes, and tins of polish – all divulge the humanity of the victims, and the inhumanity of their oppressors. Each individual possession acts as a 'gateway' to its owner and these exhibits can be overwhelming for young visitors.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is when the relationships forged since the Orientation Seminar are so vital, in enabling Educators to ensure the well-being of their group. Participants move through further exhibits in Block 6 (illustrating the life of the prisoners) and Block 27 (an exhibition entitled 'Shoah,' presented in association with Yad Vashem in Israel [https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/pavilion\\_auschwitz/index.asp](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/pavilion_auschwitz/index.asp)). They visit the courtyard of Block 11 (site of the 'Execution wall' – a reconstructed site of Polish martyrdom) and the Roll Call Square. The group then move towards the site of Höss' post-war execution, within view of the villa where he lived with his family during his time as camp commandant. Finally, the group move towards the reconstructed crematoria,<sup>xxxix</sup> which they pass through in silence at the request of the museum guide. The majority of Educators choose not to go into the gas chamber with

their groups, preferring instead to supportively receive them as they emerge. Groups then move towards the exit, handing back their headsets as they do so, before re-boarding their coaches to transfer to the site of Birkenau.

- The sites – Birkenau

There is more time for discussion between the group and their Educator at Birkenau than there will have been at Auschwitz I. Participants are often surprised by the size of Birkenau, and Educators' inputs on-site invite participants to try again to connect the scale of the industrialised murder with individual stories from survivors (such as the survivor they heard at the Orientation Seminar). As one pair of the students said, 'neither of us realised how big either of the camps were and we just kept walking and walking and walking...'. Participants visit the reconstructed barracks at the front of the site, prompting one of these students to reflect on the impact 'actually seeing the living conditions that they lived in' had on them. Critical reflection continues at the unloading ramp where the young people are invited to consider the potentially contradictory purposes of the goods wagon, as it is presented as both an exhibit and a memorial by the museum. At the ruins of the crematoria they consider the Sonderkommando and acts of resistance such as the uprising of October 1944. The group then move to the Sauna building, before concluding with a commemorative ceremony led by the rabbi accompanying the visit, before returning to the airport by coach. At each point of the visit at the Birkenau site, the focus for the Educator is on contextualising and complicating the place and its exhibits and on provoking thoughtful reflection, particularly through engagement with individuals' testimony. The dialogic space created between the museum guide, the Educator and the young person enables young people to bound their developing knowledge and understanding during the day, creating

an opportunity for critical engagement taking them beyond the passively receptive experience of most visitors on guided tours of the sites.

### **Visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum – an emotional encounter**

According to the State Museum's own website, visiting the museum can be 'a difficult and painful experience which provokes reflection and the asking of difficult questions to which there is often no answer' ([http://lekcja.auschwitz.org/en\\_12\\_miejsce\\_pamieci/#](http://lekcja.auschwitz.org/en_12_miejsce_pamieci/#)). The students clearly felt that their visit had been an emotional encounter – one that would not be easy to process. This was evident even on the coach as they approached the museum – with one expressing a worry that 'I really don't know how I'm going to feel. I can't prepare myself at all for it.' This is something Educators are aware of, and often discuss at the Orientation Seminar prior to the visit, ensuring they are on hand for participants who feel uneasy or worried prior to their arrival at the sites.

Once at the museum, the students were struck by a range of emotional reactions to particular places and objects, such as the room displaying victims' hair in Block 4 at Auschwitz I. Some of their reactions were quite linguistically extreme – 'I kept feeling sick. Every time I saw something, I felt sick. I just felt really sick.' However, another found it 'all very grounding.' It's not unusual for participants to talk about their emotional responses on site, and these are often unexpected reactions that they are trying to cope with in real time. Significantly, this often marks the beginning of a process that continues over time, and there was an overwhelming sense among the students that the emotional impact of their visit would continue to resonate and evolve in the coming days and weeks. An essential part of the *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme is the Follow Up Seminar. This usually occurs about a week after the one-



day visit and this gap allows participants time and space from the visit to begin to process their experience. Perhaps unintentionally, several of the students resonated with this during their visit. As two of them reflected, 'we think it'll hit us more when we get home, when we have time to really reflect.' Another was struggling to process how they might emotionally process their experience, saying 'I don't know. I need a minute, I need a good... I don't know when it's going to hit me. I think probably when I get home, it'll hit me.' The students seemed aware that they had something significant to deal with (or that they should have) but were unsure how or when this might happen. Some spoke about the photographs they had taken – for some these were 'to show people who haven't been what it's actually like,' whilst another reflected that 'just looking at them doesn't do it [the site] justice.' One participant saw their photographs as being more personal – '[my photographs are] just for me. I'll probably never go to Auschwitz again, so in a year or two years, to see a picture will trigger my memory.'

The final part of participants' *Lessons from Auschwitz* commitment is in undertaking a 'Next Steps' project in their school or local community. The emotional impact of their experience had clear implications for this stage as the students began to think about how they would explain what they had learned to others. As one put it candidly, 'I don't know how I'm going to explain what it was like.' This was possibly clarified by another's admission that 'I couldn't expect what it was going to be like until I'd been there.' Perhaps the experience is, necessarily, beyond comprehension and explanation, and this is something the students would need to explore with their Educators at the Follow Up Seminar in the coming days.

**Visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum with teenagers - implications for practice and research**

These students clearly found their day visit informative in ways beyond their prior classroom learning. As one commented, the visit had been ‘more informative than what we’ve been told before’ in school. There was a general feeling that the site visits had helped them ‘picture the scale of things’ better and helped correct misconceptions (such as one participant’s preconception that ‘they were all put – like in Birkenau’). In comparison to their classroom-based learning, one student summarised that ‘it [the site] really taught me everything.’ In these ways, contact with the sites lends context and complexity to young people’s developing understandings. This necessarily must be an incomplete process; there are few answers at these sites, only more questions. As one student put it, they left with far more knowledge, but much of this was ‘a lot of answers to questions I didn’t know I had’ before visiting.

Debate continues to be waged over the form and function of the museum – as Museum Director Piotr Cywiński asks, ‘how can one present this Place and its extensive history?’<sup>xi</sup> Undoubtedly ‘Auschwitz is a stage’<sup>xii</sup> – an assemblage of authenticity and inauthenticity, of history and of memory, of the past and of the present. While a visit to such a place ‘can offer unrivalled potential to engage students with their academic study,’<sup>xiii</sup> it is reasonable to reflect on how practical this is at a site of such complexity. Paradoxically then, the immense power of the place to teach about the history of the Holocaust, might also be the source of its incapacity. Taking young people there for a single day might appear to be a futile – or at least inadequate – task,<sup>xiii</sup> leaving participants little more than ‘sleep-deprived and irritable.’<sup>xiv</sup> The reasons for the *Lessons from Auschwitz* day visit are primarily financially motivated, and any alternative would mean that fewer young people could visit in this way, diminishing the reach and impact of the project. The programme is undoubtedly self-aware of these issues, evidenced through regular communication and training within the Holocaust

Educational Trust's Educator community. The educational content evolves constantly, in response to historical and pedagogical research, and logistical / funding constraints and opportunities. Similarly, the Trust works closely with the State Museum and its Guide Methodology programme, so each understands the pedagogical intentions of the other, and each other's wider contexts.

This paper has considered *Lessons from Auschwitz* as an example of good practice. It has not sought to be critical of the project, but to consider it as contextualising of some preliminary research findings which have led to, and continue to inform, a larger on-going research project. It can never be possible to meet every young visitor at these sites exactly 'where they are.' However, based on this small-scale research, I would urge educators taking young people to sites such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum to consider the following points when planning the pedagogical goals and logistics of their visit:

- Young people's motivations for visiting an authentic site such as the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum, the personal histories they bring with them, and the influence both might have on their learning experiences.
- The extent to which young people are aware of the site as a post-historical space. It is not the site as *was*, but the site as *is* and this is an important distinction to make clear to them as they visit.
- The role of the survivor in individualising the whole and how young people can be enabled to connect with the individual narrative within the wider event through their engagement with testimony.
- Young people's connections with sites as mediated spaces – through guides, displays, objects, etc., and how young people understand, interpret and contextualise these mediations within their developing world view.

- The emotional needs and responses of young people within site spaces, and the role that emotion plays in their understanding and interactions with the sites.

There can never be a perfect way to visit a place as imperfect as the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Historians view the Holocaust as ‘a complex process’;<sup>xlv</sup> one that teachers also evidently find difficult to define in the classroom.<sup>xlvi</sup> Extensive research has been undertaken in the UK in the last ten years to try to better understand teaching and learning about the Holocaust in schools, but this is an inevitably incomplete task and tends to focus on education with pupils younger than those on *Lessons from Auschwitz* projects.<sup>xlvii</sup> This paper suggests the need for further investigation and understanding, with less of a ‘top-down’ approach – focusing instead on young people’s learning and lived experiences of their encounters with the historical events.

These present extensive challenges for teachers and educators as they help shape future memory, with the generations of ‘postmemory’ in volatile global political times.<sup>xlviii</sup> The next stage of this research project aims to address these issues and more, with a wider audience of students, Educators, other participants, museum staff and survivors. It is hoped that this will help us as educators towards a better understanding of how young people encounter these sites, whilst appreciating that in the words of one of these teenagers, ‘you’ll never fully understand everything that went on’ there.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Bartyzel and Sawicki, “Report 2017,” 23.

<sup>ii</sup> Nesfield, “Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant,” 47.

<sup>iii</sup> Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Stone and Sharpley, “Consuming Dark Tourism.”

<sup>vi</sup> Dwork and Van Pelt, *Auschwitz*, 373.

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- vii Ibid.
- viii Winstone, *Holocaust Sites of Europe*.
- ix Świebocka et al., *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 13.
- x Bond and Jessica, "Introduction."
- xi Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*.
- xii Steinbacher, *Auschwitz, A History*, 13.
- xiii Stone, "Memory, Memorials and Museums," 522.
- xiv Benton, "Heritage and Changes of Regime," 152.
- xv Świebocka et al., *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 13.
- xvi Benton, "Heritage and Changes of Regime."
- xvii Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*, 46.
- xviii Bassey, "Case Study Research."
- xix Department for Education, *History Programmes of Study*.
- xx Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*, 34.
- xxi Bartyzel and Sawicki, "Report 2017," 25.
- xxii [withheld for peer review]
- xxiii Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant"; Griffiths, "Encountering Auschwitz."
- xxiv Denscombe, *Ground Rules for Social Research*.
- xxv Kawulich, *Participant Observation*, section 6.
- xxvi Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.
- xxvii Benwell, "Encountering Geopolitical Pasts."
- xxviii Chapman et al., *Evaluation of Lessons from Auschwitz*, 6.
- xxix Bartyzel and Sawicki, "Report 2017," 23.
- xxx Wieviorka, "The Witness in History," 386.
- xxxi Cowan and Maitles, *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*, 124.
- xxxii Wolnerman et al., *Oświęcim*.
- xxxiii Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 110.
- xxxiv Cowan and Maitles, *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*, 130.
- xxxv Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant."
- xxxvi Keil, "Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead," 484.
- xxxvii Bartyzel and Sawicki, "Report 2017," 30.
- xxxviii [withheld for peer review]
- xxxix Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*.
- xl Cywiński, *Epitaph*, 84.
- xli Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant," 52.
- xlvi Ibid., 45.
- xlvi Chapman et al., *Evaluation of Lessons from Auschwitz*, 11.
- xlv Gray, *Teaching the Holocaust*, 66-67.
- xlv Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution*, 7.
- xlvi Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*.
- xlvi Ibid ; Foster et al., *What Do Students Know*.
- xlvi Zurbriggen, "Researching Sensitive Topics."

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# **The Image of Auschwitz in Polish History Textbooks (1956 -1999)**

## **Abstract:**

After the Second World War in Poland, the issue of Auschwitz was gradually introduced into historical education. However, the range and the sort of information depended on many political and social factors. In this way, a specific image of the Auschwitz camp was created for propaganda purposes. According to it, the number of victims and their ethnicity were manipulated. Consequently, in historical education, the Jewish victimhood at Auschwitz was marginalized, while Polish and international martyrdom was highlighted. Although the situation changed after 1989, the manner in which the Auschwitz camp should be presented in history textbooks still arouses much controversy.

The aim of the article is to show the image of Auschwitz and its victims in the history textbooks, and show how it has changed over the years in Poland. The author analyzes textbooks used in Polish schools in the communist period and just after the political transformation. In this example, he shows the process of instrumentalizing history by the educational authorities and tries to answer the question of how it influenced the way the Polish youth perceived the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz; Holocaust; Polish and Jewish martyrdom; education; textbooks



This article will show how the image of Auschwitz has been represented in Polish history textbooks; specifically, it will focus on how such representations changed between the time of Communism and the early, post-Communist years.

The discussion will be based on an analysis of textbooks being used in Poland from the beginning of the 1950s until the end of the 1990s. During this period, according to the centralised system of education, teachers were obliged to use only textbooks that were authorised by the Ministry of National Education. Usually there was only one textbook for one particular class, so teachers were unable to choose between the various interpretations of history. Moreover, the historical narrative presented in the textbooks was an expression of the historical policy promoted by the educational authorities at that time.

The time frame of this article is significant because it is book-ended by the publication of the first history textbooks to include information about Auschwitz after the war, and the last textbooks that appeared before the school system reform in 1999. The comparison will ultimately show how the image of Auschwitz presented in these textbooks was influenced by the political transformation that took place after 1989.

The way authors of these textbooks presented the history of Auschwitz and its victims was inevitably influenced by political events of their time. In this essay, I intend to show how history was instrumentalised, and to demonstrate how the authors' vision of Auschwitz affected the perception of Polish and Jewish victimhood (martyrology) during the war. This issue has not yet been subject to sufficient critical examination. Although there exists some important research on Polish textbooks of the period, previous analyses focus mainly on presenting wider aspects of the Second World War or the Holocaust: Auschwitz itself is not their main focus.<sup>i</sup>

According to Polish law, content of textbooks must coincide with curricula. Curricular changes, which in fact were the manifestation of state politics of history, determined directions in

teaching about World War Two, including Auschwitz. Thus, in order to see the broader context, we also have to refer to the content of the history curricula regarding Auschwitz.

### **The Fifties**

The first history textbooks to include World War Two were published at the beginning of the fifties. They were written according to the Communist spirit and promoted an image of history that was advocated by the then-authorities for whom the proper presentation of the war was of a great importance. This is most likely why, in a textbook of 1952 (Kromanowa, *Historia Polski*) the Auschwitz camp – which was generally named Oświęcim (the Polish name of the town) during the entire Communist period – was extensively presented. In addition to information about the history of the camp and its location, the book also contains information about its largest subcamps, mainly KL Auschwitz II - Birkenau:

From 1941, there was an extermination camp in Brzezinka (Birkenau), in which the first devices for human poisoning with a cyclone were built. Four huge crematoria stoves were built to burn the bodies of the murdered. To this day, the exact number of victims who died in Oświęcim is not known. They are calculated at 4 to 5 million.<sup>ii</sup>

From this description it is not clear who the victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau were. And although it is emphasized elsewhere in the textbook that one of the main goals of Hitler's policy was the extermination of Jews, and that it was carried out in extermination camps including Auschwitz, these two points were made separately and not close by in the textbook.<sup>iii</sup> For many readers, the identification of Auschwitz victims with Jews was thus unclear. It is worth mentioning that such treatment of the Jews was a key concept for the textbooks of that time.

The process of de-Stalinization and the 'Polish October 1956' caused significant changes in historical education, which also influenced the shape of history textbooks in Poland. From this point, textbooks were written less ideologically, using more substantive language. At the same

time, however, some of the content of World War Two, including that related to Auschwitz, was cut off.

In the early history textbooks published just after the Second World War, information concerning KL Auschwitz (the Polish name “Oświęcim” was being used at that time) was rather scarce and very general. The name of the camp was mentioned only to exemplify the issue of concentration camps, into which – as it was being presented – the Poles arrested by the Germans had been deported.

One textbook, published in 1956 and aimed at seventh grade primary school students, mentions only briefly that ‘Some of them [camps], such as Majdanek and Oświęcim [Auschwitz], were particularly cruel. Many millions of people from all over Europe perished there.’<sup>iv</sup> This piece of information appears in the chapter entitled “Nazi occupation in Poland” (in a subsection entitled “Occupant’s terror”), which is three and a half pages in all. According to this textbook, students were only required to know the name of the camp and learn about the size of the genocide committed there, but not who the victims were. Such a marginalization of the issue of Auschwitz and other concentration camps, which are mentioned in this book only once, may indicate that at that time the issue of death camps did not play an important role in education on the Second World War. Such a general remark (even when viewed in light of information provided about many millions of victims from all over Europe) could easily escape the reader’s notice. Even if it provoked any deeper reflection, the reader could not learn from the text how many victims there were, or their identity.

### **The Sixties**

In the sixties there came about a fundamental change in the way concentration camps were presented in history textbooks. This mainly concerned Auschwitz, which was gradually becoming a symbol of the martyrdom of the Polish nation. This was the result of the

implementation of the new historical policy of state authorities, in which the history of World War II began to play an important role again. Its central axis was to cultivate the memory of ‘Nazi crimes against the Polish nation,’ which in turn was to serve the legitimization of the communist authorities in Poland.<sup>v</sup>

In handbooks for both primary and secondary schools, the amount of information about Auschwitz increased significantly during this period. In the new handbook for the seventh grade by Henryk Sędziwy, which was published in 1963 as a part of the reform of the education system,<sup>vi</sup> the issues concerning Auschwitz were placed under the heading “Nazi occupation in Poland”, in two subsections: ‘Extermination of the Polish nation’ and ‘Persecution and extermination of the Jews.’<sup>vii</sup> Most of the relevant information is found in the first subsection, while the second one merely states that Auschwitz was also an extermination camp in which the Jews were being murdered. This structure resulted in an overwhelming impression that Auschwitz was above all a place of extermination of the Poles. This perspective is confirmed by the following remarks present in the text:

In order to exterminate the [Polish] population faster, the Germans established concentration camps in the Polish lands; among them those in Oświęcim and Majdanek near Lublin were the largest. (...) Special gas chambers and crematoria constructed there, were to facilitate fast execution of the programme of extermination of Polish population. During four years in Oświęcim there died five million inmates, including women and children. Prisoners from other countries occupied by the Germans were also deported to the concentration camps.<sup>viii</sup>

As you can see, this statement does not even mention the Jews – the main victims of Auschwitz. What is more, gas chambers, which in fact were constructed to facilitate the extermination of the Jews, are presented by the author as a tool for murdering Poles. This general view is not

altered by the last sentence of the paragraph, which mentions inmates from other occupied countries, because the textbook author ‘forgets’ to add that the vast majority of them were the Jews living in those countries. Also, the description of severe conditions prevailing in the camp, which can be found in the same subsection and which is intended to emphasize the suffering of the victims, is implicitly related to Polish prisoners as the only ones mentioned there.

When talking about textbooks for primary schools published during the sixties, it is worth mentioning an auxiliary book ‘A short outline history. 1870-1964.’ Published in 1966, the text was approved by the Ministry of Education as a handbook for adults who were returning to education at the seventh grade level.<sup>ix</sup> While its content does not differ significantly from the 1963 textbook analysed above, for the first time there appears in it an iconic photograph of the main gate of the camp Auschwitz I with a slogan ‘Arbeit macht frei,’ which in the following years was included in most handbooks. Disparate data concerning the number of victims of Auschwitz was another important difference. The authors stated that in the camp there died not five but only three million people. Both handbooks, when discussing the persecution and extermination of the Jews, include the fact that the Jews were being murdered en masse in extermination camps regardless of age or sex. The later text, however, adds that ‘This mass and horrendous killing was a preliminary to the extermination of the Polish nation and other Slavonic nations planned for the near future.’<sup>x</sup> This statement was unsurprisingly intended to depict the extermination of the Jews in a broader context of ethnic politics of the Third Reich, with the accomplishment of the Generalplan Ost as its main goal. At the same time, however, it challenged the unique character of the massacre of the Jews during the war, and automatically increased the ‘importance of suffering’ of other nations.

Henryk Sędziwy was also the author of a new textbook for secondary school students, published in 1962.<sup>xi</sup> Like the handbook for primary schools, it contained much more information concerning Auschwitz, though not all of it was reliable. The author also attempted to evaluate

the relative significance of Auschwitz among other camps. In the subsection 'Plans of biological extermination of the Polish nation,' he says that the Germans established in the Polish lands a dozen or so concentration camps, among which

the largest ones were in Oświęcim, in Brzezinka near Oświęcim there was established a camp for women, in Majdanek, Treblinka, Bełżec... (...) On a marsh near Oświęcim there was established the largest concentration camp in whole Europe. In Oświęcim there permanently abided about one hundred thousand prisoners doing various works in the camp and outside it (...). The conditions of work were so bad, that the prisoners were doomed to death of exhaustion, illnesses, hunger or cold – apart from murders committed permanently by the camp police.<sup>xii</sup>

Describing the character of the camp in Oświęcim, the author states that it was simultaneously a camp of forced labour and an extermination camp, but he does not identify its main victims. Juxtaposition of numerical data implies, however, that the main target was not the Jews: the author says that out of five million victims, the Jewish population amounted to slightly more than two million. Sędziwy also makes an astonishing differentiation concerning periods of the most intense killing in Auschwitz. He says, that 'between 1 May 1940 and 1 December 1943 two and a half million people were killed, and another two and a half million died of hunger and exhaustion.'<sup>xiii</sup> In this way, the author omits an important fact: that the biggest mass killings of the Jews took place in summer 1944, when over four hundred thousand Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz. This may simply be a mistake on the part of the author, because in November 1944 mass killings of the Jews in gas chambers were stopped. If that were the case, however, the date of the initial killings committed in Auschwitz would also be incorrect, because the first transport of the Polish political prisoners came on the fourteenth of June 1940. What is more, the total numbers of victims that the author suggests raises serious doubts, because officially acknowledged statistics (estimated in 1945 by the Soviet Extraordinary State

Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices, but not verified not until after 1989) indicated four rather than five million victims of the camp. Such a huge divergence may show a tendency to overstate numbers of victims in order to emphasize the general importance of Auschwitz.

As I mentioned above, the author does not specify which national or ethnic group constituted the majority of the victims, though in one of the subsequent parts of the handbook he states that in Oświęcim two million Jews were murdered (the largest number of all the camps). However, this does not imply that they were the main group of victims, especially as he states later that ‘Nazis deported to the concentration camps located in Poland convicts from all parts of occupied Europe, often sending them directly from the loading ramp to gas chambers.’<sup>xiv</sup> It is a well-known fact that only the Jews were being dealt with this way, and it was almost exclusively the Jews who were murdered in gas chambers. In neither case did the author make an attempt to connect these facts together. One can suppose that this was a deliberate decision intended to blur the ethnicity of the victims and to put on the same level the fates of both Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners. Such a supposition is confirmed in the subsequent part of the discussion, where the textbook’s author says that the Germans profited from their victims even after their deaths:

Special units were collecting and sorting possessions of the murdered – including pulling out golden teeth. German factories produced mattresses out of human hair, and the ashes were being utilized as fertiliser. There were instances of producing various products out of human skin and soap out of human fat.<sup>xv</sup>

While he explains that not all of these crimes were being committed in Auschwitz, the author does not mention that it is the Jews who were the likeliest victims.

While talking about the ethnicity of the victims of Auschwitz, it should be stressed that this textbook contains quite a substantial amount of information on the extermination of the Jews in general, which is seen by the author as a very particular experience. The following excerpts seem to confirm that:

First and above all Hitler condemned to extermination the Jews. (...) At the end of 1941 the Nazis set about executing a programme of mass killing of the Jews. (...) The Jews, crowded in cattle vans, were deported to the camps and there sent directly to gas chambers. In Bełżec, in the camp intended exclusively for the Jews, more than a million of them were murdered; in Treblinka – about half a million; in Oświęcim – more than two million, apart from those murdered before on various occasions or during liquidation of the ghettos for instance in Białystok or Warsaw. This – as the Germans called it – ‘displacement action’ was one of the most terrible crimes of genocide committed by the Hitlerites [Nazis].<sup>xvi</sup>

The singularity of the Jewish experience in general is paradoxically accompanied by the lack of clear connections between Auschwitz and its Jewish victims; this was an inherent part of the widespread process of internationalization of the victims of Auschwitz. In order to show that Auschwitz was primarily a place of international martyrdom, the Communist authorities presented Auschwitz deportees mainly in categories of citizenship. They pointed to the country of origin of the victims rather than their ethnicity, despite the fact that it was for the latter that the vast majority of victims were deported. In this way, the Jews, the main victims of Auschwitz, were treated as citizens of various European countries and not as a separate ethnic or national group.

It should be noted, however, that these processes began much earlier and were part of the policy of commemorating the victims of Auschwitz that was established at the very beginning of the



existence of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. The interpretative direction of Auschwitz was laid down in the act establishing the Museum in 1947, in which it was stated that ‘The area of the former Nazi concentration camp in Oświęcim (...) remain for all times as a Monument to the Martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other nations’ (Ustawa o upamiętnieniu Męczeństwa). For years, this Act has shaped the way that Auschwitz is perceived in Poland as a place where Poles and representatives of different nations perished.<sup>xvii</sup> The International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, which was unveiled in Birkenau in 1967, was the symbolic crowning of this specific international policy of memory. At its foot, nineteen plaques were placed with the following inscription written in the various languages spoken by the victims: ‘This is the place of martyrdom and death of four million victims murdered in the Nazi genocide, 1940-45.’ The text on the plaques was framed very generally, without specific reference to who the victims of Auschwitz were. In addition, the first plaque was in Polish, and the following were arranged in alphabetical order, therefore the plaque in Yiddish, symbolizing the Jews - the largest ethnic group of the victims - was at the end. Undoubtedly, this meant the marginalization of Jewish victims who, due to their number, should be exposed and not reduced to one of many national categories.<sup>xviii</sup> Such an approach obscured the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and led to a specific process of polonization of the victims of Auschwitz. An example of this process was the case of the so-called encyclopedists (encyklopedyści) - editors of the Encyclopedia Powszechna PWN, who in 1968 were removed from the editorial board for the development of separate terms for the concentration camps and extermination camps. In this encyclopedia, correct information appeared that 99% of the victims of the extermination camps were Jews. However, it was in conflict with the propaganda vision of the past, according to which it was necessary to emphasize the suffering of various nations, without pointing to a specific Jewish experience.<sup>xix</sup>

The first textbook for reformed eight-class school<sup>xx</sup> was published in 1966.<sup>xxi</sup> It was also written by Henryk Sędziwy, hence it contained much of the same information as the earlier handbooks discussed above. However, the contents concerning Auschwitz were expanded in this newer version. It should also be emphasized that for the first time there appeared a separate subsection on camps entitled: ‘Concentration camps and mass extermination camps.’<sup>xxii</sup> This differentiation was vital, because it showed that concentration camps were linked with political prisoners, while extermination camps (so called “death camps”) were connected primarily with Jewish people. The author begins his discussion with a characterization of people deported to concentration camps and says that they were mainly members of the intelligentsia, political activists, teachers and other opponents of Nazism. Then he explains the aims of the concentration camps and the circumstances that led to the establishment of extermination camps:

Concentration camps were intended as places of extermination of people. The Nazis decided however, that the process was too slow. That is why they established mass extermination camps – known as “death camps”. In those camps, intended mainly for the quick extermination of the Jewish population, people were murdered in gas chambers and their bodies were then burnt in special ovens – crematoria.<sup>xxiii</sup>

This differentiation also shows the differences in the treatment Jews and non-Jews in camps by the Germans. The first were subject to mass killing. Not only does the author differentiate between various types of camps, but he also explains the largest of the mass extermination camps. This is the first time that names of all the so called ‘death camps’ appear in these textbooks: Majdanek, Bełżec, Chełmno-on-Ner, Sobibór and Treblinka. As far as Auschwitz is concerned, the author emphasizes that it was the only place which functioned both as a concentration camp and a mass extermination camp. He says: ‘Three million people were murdered there, including many women and children. Oświęcim became a worldwide symbol

of martyrdom of nations and the most telling example of Nazi genocide.<sup>'xxiv</sup> Confirming the international character of the camp, the author goes on to say that people from all parts of occupied Europe were deported there. Curiously enough, in this handbook, information about medical experiments carried out in Auschwitz also appeared for the first time. It is also worth mentioning that this textbook contains, for the first time, two photographs of Auschwitz. One of them shows the crematoria in Auschwitz II-Birkenau; the second, a barbed wire fence of Auschwitz I. All this indicates that the author of the textbook was particularly concerned with the theme of Auschwitz. At the same time, however, it demonstrates the then-typical manner of presenting the history of the camp, in which the country of origin of the victims was more important than their ethnicity.

In 1967, the first handbook for the reformed secondary school was also published under the title 'History for class XI. From the October Revolution to the end of World War Two.'<sup>xxv</sup> Like in the previous one, published in 1962, contents concerning Auschwitz were placed in the subsection 'Planned extermination of the Polish nation.' While the information included there was very similar to that of the older textbooks, for the first time it was acknowledged that Majdanek also played a 'twofold role as both labour [camp] and mass extermination [camp].'<sup>xxvi</sup> In this textbook the number of victims of Auschwitz was also revised from five to four million. There were still remarks about gas chambers and about the exploitation of the victims' bodies, as well as statements along the lines of: 'to extermination camps the Nazis were bringing their victims from all the occupied countries.'<sup>xxvii</sup> There was however one fundamental difference: contents concerning the Holocaust were put into a separate subsection entitled 'Extermination of the Jews.' There also appeared new figures concerning the Jewish victims of extermination camps: the number of victims of Jewish origin increased to two and a half million, which together with the decreased total number of all victims suggests that the Jews constituted the majority of the murdered. In the context of a discussion of anti-Jewish policies, the expression

‘solution to the Jewish question’ was used for the first time. Beside that, the final remark of the previous handbook, which stated that the extermination of the Jews was a prelude to the extermination of the Slaves and Poles, was abandoned.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **The Seventies**

In the seventies, Auschwitz was being mentioned in textbooks only as a place of extermination of the Polish nation. The fact that the Jews were being killed there was omitted. As a matter of fact, the whole issue of the extermination of the Jews was being marginalized and reduced to a few sentences, the majority of which emphasised either the Warsaw ghetto uprising or the actions of the Poles to save the Jews.

Roman Wapiński’s history textbook of 1972 is an example of this. In a chapter on Nazi occupation, the author states that, according to German plans, all the inhabitants of Poland ‘were to be killed sooner or later.’ We read as follows:

The system of Nazi camps which included concentration camps played an important role in the process of completion of those plans. According to the data gathered so far in seventeen countries occupied by the Third Reich, Nazis established 8.8 thousand camps, sub-camps, prisons and ghettoes – a thousand of them in Polish lands. Among them there were concentration camps in Oświęcim-Brzezinka, which claimed 3 to 4 million victims and in Majdanek. At the end of the Second World War the Poles constituted the largest national group of prisoners of concentration camps – about 25-30 percent of the whole.<sup>xxix</sup>

It is worth mentioning that, at that time, textbooks for elementary schools - paradoxically - contained much more information on camps and the Holocaust, including short, half-page subsections concerning concentration camps and the extermination of the Jews. For example, one such text notes that concentration camps were one of the ways that the Nazi policy of

extermination was realised.<sup>xxx</sup> As far as Auschwitz is concerned, the book explains that people of various nationalities were being killed there (without mentioning the Jews) and that it was one of the largest concentration camps. Curiously enough, the text does not say anything about extermination camps, although one of them – Treblinka – was mentioned by name. It is worth emphasizing that this textbook not only fails to differentiate between the two types of camps, but also concentration camps were erroneously described as centres of mass extermination, to which the Nazis deported the Jews, who ‘were poisoned to death there with gas in specially constructed chambers.’<sup>xxxi</sup> This seems to be a deliberate manipulation aimed at blurring the differences in how Jews and non-Jews were treated by the Germans. What is more, it emphasises the martyrdom of the Polish nation which, according to the authors, was condemned to extinction as a whole.

There is no doubt that the reasons for these changes should be traced to the antisemitic campaign of 1967/1968, as a result of which the Polish-Communist authorities began to implement a new historical policy on how to present Polish-Jewish relations from the Second World War.<sup>xxxii</sup> According to this policy, the seventies saw the promotion of an historical narrative in which Auschwitz was the place of, above all, Polish martyrdom. The consequence of this was the marginalization of Jewish victims; at the same time, it also exposed the suffering of Poles and emphasised that their fate was similar to that of the Jews. In addition, in the context of the Holocaust, only the righteous attitudes of the Polish population towards Jews were pointed out as, for example, when the brotherhood of arms was made significant in discussions of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This was a clear manipulation of history. The new historical policy was reflected not only in history curricula and textbooks, but also in educational practice, and in particular forms of commemoration, both at the former Auschwitz concentration camp and other memorial sites as well as in public spaces, where in the seventies, memorials of Polish victims of war were commonly erected. It is worth noting that there were very few Jews left in

Poland to consult because, as a result of the Polish Political Crisis of 1968, about 13,000 Jews had emigrated from Poland; this accounted for over half of the total Jewish population of the country. The remaining Jewish community was too weak to be able to influence the historical policy of the state.

### **The Eighties**

The eighties brought significant changes in history curricula and, consequently, changes in textbooks narratives. It was the ‘Solidarity’ social movement that acted as catalyst for those processes.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Under pressure from society, the authorities agreed to lessen censorship and allowed teachers demanding changes to speak. One of their main demands concerned ‘filling up the so-called white spots.’<sup>xxxiv</sup> Consequently, themes that had thus far been neglected began to be included in curricula. They mainly concerned recent history and the Second World War. There was also demands for new interpretations of numerous historical events – particularly those connected with the two largest neighbours of Poland: Germany and the Soviet Union. The discussion was also initiated concerning Polish-Jewish relations, mainly in respect of the Second World War. During these debates, Auschwitz began to appear as a highly problematic memorial having special importance not only for the Poles, as had been emphasized earlier, but also for the Jews. Consequently, processes of remembrance linked to the site became more and more complex; this led to a peculiar Polish-Jewish conflict of memory.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The changes in curricula, as I have mentioned above, were primarily aimed at focusing more heavily on the theme of “Concentration camps”; yet there were still no discussions of specific examples. In the context of the extermination of the Jews, there appeared, for the first time, such figures as Mordechaj Anielewicz or Janusz Korczak, who were the symbols of the Jewish military and spiritual resistance movements during the Holocaust. Discussions of various uprisings – not only the one that took place in the Warsaw ghetto – also served to highlight the

Jewish resistance movement. For the first time ŻOB (the Jewish Fighting Organization) was mentioned as an example of the Jewish fighting forces. It is also worth mentioning that for the first time, extermination of the Roma people was included in curricula (Program Liceum).

All of these changes led to greater differentiation between concentration camps and extermination camps. The latter were being more and more clearly identified with Jews; this is confirmed for example by a paragraph taken from the handbook for the 8th class of elementary school:

The Nazis began eliminating ghettos from the smaller ones. They deported the Jews to extermination camps and murdered them there, poisoning them with a gas in chambers constructed specially for this purpose. Camps in Oświęcim, Treblinka, Majdanek and others became places where many millions of Jews from all European countries occupied by the Germans were killed.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

What is more, this textbook includes significant amounts of new information about Auschwitz. It mentions, for instance, Franciscan father Maksymilian Kolbe, who volunteered for death in place of a fellow prisoner. The author emphasizes that Kolbe's martyr's death later became a basis for his canonisation. The book also includes, for the first time, a statement about the difficulties of determining an exact number of victims of the concentration camps. However, while talking about victims of Auschwitz, which is described only as a concentration extermination camp, the author states that 3 million people of various national origins were killed there. On the one hand this statement heralded future revision of the total number of victims, which ultimately turned out to be much lower than is officially recognised today. On the other hand, however, it showed that in 'handbook narration' the phenomenon of Auschwitz still had a Polonocentric<sup>xxxvii</sup> and international character, which among other things was indicated by consistent omissions of the Jewish identity of the largest victim group.

In a handbook for secondary schools on the theme 'Extermination of the Poles, Jews and Gypsies,' there is an extensive – when compared to previous years – discussion of issues related to the camps.<sup>xxxviii</sup> For the first time, the camp in Oświęcim is named Auschwitz-Birkenau, which undoubtedly had much to do with public debate taking place at that time on whether the Polish or German name of the camp should be used.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In the handbook mentioned above there is detailed information about the process of killing people in Auschwitz, as well as about other concentration and extermination camps. This handbook also contains, for the first time, the names of four mass extermination camps: Chełmno-on-Ner (Kulmhof), Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka (the latter did appear earlier but as a concentration camp). Unfortunately, in this relatively rich material, the issue of the extermination of the Jews is still marginalized<sup>xl</sup>; the author reduces it to a few sentences saying that, starting from 1941, the camps were receiving constant transports of Jews from the ghettos that were being liquidated at that time. However, one cannot find any information about the number of victims of Auschwitz or their nationalities. The fact that textbooks had stopped presenting the victims in national categories suggests that the process of internationalization of Auschwitz victims that had lasted for many years was starting to change.

### **The Nineties**

The political transformation of 1989 brought further changes in the Polish school system, as a result of which the Holocaust, which until then was absent or marginalized, began to occupy a prominent place in school education. The abolition of censorship and the replacement of educational centralism with pluralism created the conditions for discussion on various silenced and previously instrumental subjects, including Auschwitz.

However, these transformations did not take place immediately. It started with ad hoc changes involving the introduction of the so-called 'curricular minima.' They were to 'slim down' the



curricula by limiting compulsory contents. It was aimed at departing from encyclopaedic knowledge toward deepened education. The changes were temporary, because fundamental reform of the education system was being heralded. In fact they remained until 1999, when the reform was introduced at last.

As I mentioned above, the ‘curricular minima’ contained limited compulsory contents. It was the teacher who decided to what degree to expand them and how much time should be spent on particular themes and topics. Such a flexible attitude was to facilitate usage of various didactic materials before new history handbooks would be published.

The general character of curricular entries enabled teachers to interpret history and select teaching material rather freely. This diminished the role of handbooks, not least because, in most cases, the ones being used were merely revised versions of older ones. Nevertheless, they were still being used in numerous schools as primary didactic tools, and were considered a main source of pupils’ knowledge.

In one of the earliest handbooks for secondary schools published after the transformation, there is a chapter entitled ‘Nazi camps and prisons in the Polish lands.’<sup>xli</sup> We can read there that the system of camps established by the Germans included centres of mass extermination, concentration camps, labour camps, penal camps, transitory camps and many others. The author lists their names and points out that similar institutions existed in other occupied countries as well. Importantly, he also differentiates various groups of victims, stating, that ‘In the camps there were detained prisoners of various nationalities, political options and religions. The Jews and Poles suffered the greatest biological losses.’<sup>xlii</sup> It should be emphasized that, for the first time, the Jews are indicated in a handbook as the main victims of Nazi camps. Another important piece of information concerning Auschwitz is the reduced number of the victims, which according to the author amounted to 1-3 million. Importantly, this handbook appeared at

the same time as the paper by Franciszek Piper discussing the issue of the number of the victims of Auschwitz.<sup>xliii</sup> Piper questioned the official data and called for reducing the number to 1.5 million deported, out of which 1,1 million were killed. Additionally, he pointed out that the Jews constituted the vast majority (90%) of victims. This paper has changed the way Auschwitz was perceived, and since then it has been associated mainly with the martyrdom of the Jews. Today, Piper's estimates of the number of victims of Auschwitz are widely recognized by historians.

Unfortunately, textbooks for primary schools offered different depictions of Auschwitz, which were still shaped by the polonocentric perspective. In spite of a substantial increase in the amount of information about Nazi camps, there were no references to the role the camps played in the extermination of the Jews.<sup>xliv</sup> Curiously enough, other groups of victims were not mentioned either. The Poles were the only group mentioned in this context.<sup>xlv</sup> Quite opposite was the case of other extermination camps, which were clearly connected with the Jewish victims. In another textbook for primary schools we can read: 'In order to do that [to exterminate Jews], new extermination camps were established: in Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibór. Mainly people of Jewish origin were deported there and as a rule they were instantly killed in gas chambers.'<sup>xlvi</sup>

The situation changed dramatically in the second half of the nineties with the publication of entirely new handbooks, which depicted Auschwitz in a radically new way. The fundamental difference was in the explicit identification of Auschwitz with the Jewish victims. The handbook for class eight states: 'KL Auschwitz-Birkenau (Oświęcim-Brzezinka) is the largest Jewish cemetery in the world. Out of 1.5 million people tormented to death and murdered in this camp, about one million were of Jewish origin.'<sup>xlvii</sup> This statement accurately reflects attitudes of the time.

The history handbook for secondary schools published in 1997 declares that it was no accident that the camp was located in Oświęcim, because in future it was to become a place of ‘the final solution to the Jewish question’ (Endlösung), that is the extermination of the Jews. It was located there because of large centres of Jewish population in Generalgouvernement. The intention was to minimize costs of transportation.<sup>xlviii</sup> This statement indicates the role that Auschwitz played in the extermination of the Jews and, indirectly, reveals its centrality.

Those fundamental changes in the depiction of Auschwitz, from Polish martyrdom to Jewish martyrdom, are confirmed by the textbook by Anna Radziwił and Wojciech Roszkowski published in 1999. The text claims: ‘Places of mass executions such as Ponary in Lithuania or Babi Yar in Kiev, camps in Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau went down in history as the areas of the Holocaust.’<sup>xlix</sup> This statement indicates the status of Auschwitz as a one of the symbols of the extermination of Jews; from the beginning of the 1990s, this view also began to be accepted in Poland.

Undoubtedly, changes in the textual narrative about Auschwitz from the 1990s were a reflection of the new research conducted at that time as well as the dissemination of their results by the media. Of particular significance here were the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, which due to their scope (the first in free Poland and the participation of numerous world leaders) have attracted the attention of the media, both in Poland and abroad.<sup>1</sup> In this context, one should also not forget about the several years of work of the Polish-Israeli textbook commission, which in 1995 published joint arrangements regarding the manner of presenting the history of Jews in Poland and the history of Poland in Israel.<sup>li</sup> Although these arrangements did not come into force immediately,<sup>lii</sup> they gradually inspired the authors of textbooks to change the way Auschwitz was presented. Eventually, the camp would become the main icon of the Holocaust.

## Notes:

<sup>i</sup> See, for example: Stępnik, “Zbrodnie nazizmu,” 107-136; Tych, “Problematyka Zagłady,” 97-117; Szuchta, “Zagłada Żydów,” 109-128; Trojański and Kalisz, “Die Darstellung,” 153-172.

<sup>ii</sup> Kromanowa, *Historia Polski*, 437-438.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>iv</sup> Kwaśniewicz et al. *Historia dla klasy VII*, 146.

<sup>v</sup> Szuchta, “Zagłada Żydów”; see also: Zaręba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja*.

<sup>vi</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy VII*.

<sup>vii</sup> This is the first school handbook in which an issues of the extermination of the Jews were singled out in separate subsection.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>ix</sup> Pietrzykowski and Sędziwy, *Krótki zarys dziejów*.

<sup>x</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy VII*, 222; Pietrzykowski and Sędziwy, *Krótki zarys dziejów*, 171.

<sup>xi</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy XI*.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-167.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy XI*, 167.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvii</sup> See: Trojański, “Upamiętnianie ofiar”.

<sup>xviii</sup> Archiwum Rady Ochrony; See also: Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona*.

<sup>xix</sup> See: Rutkowski, *Adam Bromberg*.

<sup>xx</sup> The new school system meant that there were now seven rather than eight grades of primary school. The consequence was that new textbooks had to be prepared for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in which the topic of the World War Two was discussed. Previously, these topics were discussed in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade which, up to that point, had been the final grade of primary education.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy VIII*.

<sup>xxii</sup> In the chapter entitled ‘Nazi policy of extermination of the Polish nation,’ apart from a subsection dedicated to concentration camps and extermination camps, there was also a subsection entitled ‘Ghettoes,’ devoted entirely to the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy VIII*, 172.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxv</sup> Sędziwy, *Historia dla klasy XI*.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 242-243.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>xxix</sup> Wapiński, *Historia dla klasy IV*, 73.

<sup>xxx</sup> Szcześniak, *Historia dla klasy VIII*, 56.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See: Węgrzynek, *Die Darstellung*.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> ‘Solidarity’ (Polish: Solidarność) is a Polish labour union that was founded in 1980 under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa. In the 1980s, it was also a broad social and political movement for democratization and deep systemic reforms of communist Poland. This popular movement used the methods of civil resistance to advance the workers' rights and social change. It created an independent political space where alternative institutions, activities, and discourses could develop and flourish. As a result ‘Solidarity’ shook and delegitimized the communist regime and in 1989 led to a national compromise and peaceful transfer of power in Poland.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Bochwic, *Narodziny i działalność*, 100-110.

<sup>xxxv</sup> See: Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt*.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Szcześniak, *Historia. Polska*, 222-223.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Examples of this can be found in the handbook for class four of primary school: ‘In order to exterminate the Poles, the Nazis established concentration camps called “factories of death”. [...] The

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largest death camp was located in Oświęcim. Today there is a museum there, which is to remind the whole world of Nazi crimes.’ (Centkowski and Syta, *Historia 4*, 132).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Siergiejczyk, *Dzieje najnowsze*, 172-173.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Terminology changes were confirmed by the change of the official name of the museum, which took place in 1999, from Oświęcim-Brzezinka State Museum to Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim (Ustawa z dnia 7 maja 1999 r.).

<sup>xl</sup> In a different and much more extensive way, the extermination of the Jews was presented in the handbook by Adamski and Chmiel entitled *Czasy, ludzie, wydarzenia*. It contains a long chapter devoted to the persecution and extermination of the Jews. However, this relatively extensive text marginalizes the issue of extermination of the Jews in death camps, focusing mainly on the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto and other places.

<sup>xli</sup> Pankowicz, *Historia. Polska*, 58.

<sup>xlii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xliii</sup> Piper, *Ilu ludzi zginęło*.

<sup>xliv</sup> Szczęśniak, *Historia. Polska i świat*, 56.

<sup>xlv</sup> Glubiński, *Historia 8*, 253-257.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Jagiełło and Syta, *Historia 8*, 127.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Sierpowski, *Historia najnowsza*, 133.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Garlicki, *Historia 1939-1996/97*, 38-39.

<sup>xlix</sup> Radziwił and Roszkowski, *Historia 1939-1956*, 35.

<sup>1</sup> See: Greń, *Pamięć a media*, 155-182; Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 110-117.

<sup>li</sup> Garlicki and Eden, *Polsko-Izraelska*.

<sup>lii</sup> This issue is indicated by the authors of the critical analysis of history textbooks regarding the implementation of these findings, which was prepared by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (See: *Tematyka żydowska*, 13-116).

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# From Auschwitz to Jedwabne: Holocaust Memory in post-1989 Polish Fiction

## Abstract:

This article looks at how literature becomes a mimesis of memory, that is how it responds to shifts within the Polish cultural memory of the Holocaust, from the end of the 1980s to 2016, and it offers an attempt at systematising these developments. Even though the ‘new’ Polish literature is only three decades old, certain currents can already be distinguished in terms of themes and modes of representing the Holocaust but also Polish-Jewish relations. The article begins with works which address the absence of Auschwitz as a Jewish tragedy e.g. in P. Huelle’s *Who Was David Weiser?* (1987), which I see as a ‘site of memory’ (P. Nora), following a gradual change of treatment of the Holocaust, specifically as a tragedy of Polish Jews, to a huge national debate about Polish complicity in the Holocaust brought about by the publication of Jan. T. Gross’s book *Neighbours*, a discussion which has continued since the year 2000. Fictional works directly inspired by Gross’s revelations about Jewish pogroms, such as *Our Class* (2009) by T. Słobodzianek, can be seen dealing with the traumatic memories of *Zagłada* [Pol. holocaust], anti-Jewish violence, the question of guilt as well as memory and forgetting. However, in the recent decade, we observe the emergence of yet another type of fictional work, represented by such novels as O. Tokarczuk’s *Księgi Jakubowe* (*The Books of Jacob*; 2014) or S. Twardoch’s *Król* (*The King*; 2016), which do not focus on Polish-Jewish relations during the war but recreate Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust. Non-literary examples include the 2013 opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN in Warsaw. This signifies another stage of cultural

memory, evidenced in ‘re-judaizing’ the Polish (literary) landscape (K. Underhill), a phase suggesting a process of reconciliation and coming to terms with the past.

**Keywords:** Holocaust memory and representation, Polish fiction, trauma, antisemitism, Jewish revival

*To begin with, there must be a will to remember* (Pierre Nora)

## **Introduction**

There is a crucial distinction in the way Auschwitz and Jedwabne come to feature as symbols of the Holocaust within the collective memory in Poland. Although both relate to the period of Poland’s occupation by Hitler’s Germany during the Second World War, Auschwitz, with its German name, instantly becomes tied to the Nazi infrastructure of the camps, systematic and bureaucratic killing, and to the martyrdrom of the Polish nation. In *Mala Zagłada* (Minor apocalypse; 2015), based on the memories of the destruction of the Polish village Sochy in Eastern Poland, Anna Janko writes ‘Auschwitz it is not Poland. It is a piece of German skin transplanted and sewn onto the Polish body, onto the Polish town.’<sup>i</sup> *Auschwitz* points at the external aggressor, stressed in the foreign name of the place adopted to commemorate the concentration camps site.<sup>ii</sup> Jedwabne, on the other hand, has completely different connotations. A small town in North-Eastern Poland contains a horrific story of Poles who, on the 10th of July 1941, turned against their Jewish neighbours and brutally massacred the entire population.<sup>iii</sup> It immediately raises a long list of questions, about Polish complicity in the Holocaust, guilt, the nature of Polish-Jewish neighbourly relations, memory and forgetting. Indeed, Auschwitz and Jedwabne can be seen as representing two competing modes of memory that emerged in Poland in the post-2000 period.<sup>iv</sup> These modes are most clearly reflected in the

production of museums, spaces of commemoration and the narratives surrounding them, as well as in cultural production, literature and film.<sup>v</sup> The public discussion about Jedwabne, which exploded in the year 2000 ‘forced Poles for the first time into a head-on confrontation with their own role in the Holocaust,’ observes Geneviève Zubrzycki, and it is for that reason that the word ‘Jedwabne’ came to symbolise a landmark in Polish memory studies.<sup>vi</sup> To an entire generation of writers and artists, such as performance artist, Rafal Betlejewski, learning about the 1941 events, was a ‘cognitive shock’ and a turning point in their artistic inquiry.<sup>vii</sup> For many, facing the past and truly dealing with the sense of shame and guilt meant turning the subject into an artistic form. In his study of Polish prose and historiography about the Holocaust, Bartłomiej Krupa argues that a culminating moment in, what he describes as, the biggest conflict of narrating the Holocaust in Poland, was in the year 2003, when the disputes around Jedwabne quieted down, and that after that year not much development occurred in terms of the types of narratives dealing with the Holocaust.<sup>viii</sup> I want to challenge that view by posing a claim that, as far as fiction is concerned, the discussion about Jedwabne provoked a great diversification of literary responses to the Holocaust,<sup>ix</sup> and to the Jewish history in Poland more generally, for the decades to come with some distinguishable patterns, themes and stages. In this article, I attempt to classify those by examining how literature responds to developments within the Holocaust memory in Poland, beginning with the end of the communist period through ‘democratisation’ of memory up to the year 2016, introducing specific literary examples to illustrate my points.<sup>x</sup>

The genre termed ‘Polish Holocaust literature’ includes an extensive collection of works, beginning with poetry of those who lived through ghettos and camps, fictionalised memories of camp experiences written during the Second World War and immediately after, a type generally labeled ‘camp literature’ (*literatura obozowa*) – sometimes also ‘lager literature,’ which embraces representations of the gulag too<sup>xi</sup> – with Tadeusz Borowski’s and

Zofia Nałkowska's short stories listed as the most prominent examples of this kind.<sup>xii</sup> Other group of works consists of those written outside of Poland, during the Polish Peoples Republic, by the Polish/Jewish émigré writers, such as Henryk Grynberg.<sup>xiii</sup> There are also domestic voices of the survivors, for example Michał Głowiński or Hanna Krall; all three writers have been creating works with a reference to Holocaust experiences well into contemporary times.<sup>xiv</sup> Noteworthy, the focus of this article is mainly on the writers without, what Marianne Hirsch describes a 'living connection'<sup>xv</sup> to the Holocaust, and what Eva Hoffman termed 'postgeneration'; therefore, these writers can be seen responding primarily to the debates and circulation of texts about the Holocaust in the public domain.<sup>xvi</sup> They are the voice of the collective consciousness. While recalling other examples, the works of fiction I focus on primarily to support the discussion are Pawel Huelle's *Who Was David Weiser?* (1987), two plays inspired by Jedwabne events, Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class* (2008) and Piotr Rowicki's *Przylgnięcie* (*Clinging*; 2008), *Pensjonat* (*Guesthouse*; 2009) by Piotr Płaziński which concerns the fragility of memory of the disappearing Jewish heritage, and, last but not least, two novels, Olga Tokarczuk's 2014 *Księgi Jakubowe* (*The Books of Jacob*)<sup>xvii</sup> and Szczepan Twardoch's *Król* (*The King*; 2016).<sup>xviii</sup> These works can be distinguished as not specifically about the Holocaust but rather addressing the problem of its memory: suppressed or completely absent. In limiting the scope of literary examples, I strive to provide more specific insights on the themes and narrative techniques relating to memory, rather than giving a mere overview of generic trends.

The phrase 'from Auschwitz to Jedwabne,' in the title of this article, intends to capture the shift in memory and treatment of the Holocaust that occurred between the end of the 1980s and 2016, the year of publication of Twardoch's novel that I see as a new literary phenomenon in recounting the Polish-Jewish past, registering the movement from a complete absence of the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy to re-judaising Holocaust memory studies.<sup>xix</sup> In thinking about

literature's role to mediate different aspects of cultural remembrance, even those which at first seem irreconcilable, I was inspired by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney's insights on the role of literature as a medium in the production of cultural memory. This comprises firstly, of literature being a 'medium of remembrance', secondly, literature as an 'object of remembrance,' and, thirdly, literature as a 'medium for observing the production of cultural memory.'<sup>xx</sup> In the latter sense, the most valid for the aim of this article, literature can be treated as a 'mimesis of memory,' reflecting upon the 'epistemology, ethics, and workings of collective memory'; that way, literature builds a dialogue with historical and sociological interpretations of the past.<sup>xxi</sup> This approach can be linked to the claims about literature as a particular type of *lieu de memoire*, translated into English as a site of memory, an idea developed by Pierre Nora in his 1980s study. I want to consider literature's role as a site of memory in relation to the narratives about Auschwitz and Jedwabne, going back to the original, ambiguous meaning of this concept as conceived by Nora. Literature thrives on complexity, ambiguity and on what is hidden, it can thus embark on the quest of turning the silenced and uncomfortable truths into a story, engaging the consumers of the story not only intellectually, but also affectively. In other words, literature makes us feel things and in that way, improves our understanding of particularly difficult, or hard to process, historical events. The stages of literary shifts proposed here are by no means exhaustive or limited to the indicated periods; rather they overlap while new trends develop at later stages, after the new knowledge has been processed and transformed.

### **Absence of Auschwitz as Jewish tragedy**

The first stage of the observable changes in the attitudes towards representing the past occurred during the period of the communist thaw in the second half of the 1980s through the first decade of the 1990s. Literature, but also film, of that period addresses the silences about Auschwitz and the lack of memory of the Jewish Holocaust. Speaking about the Holocaust in Polish film

of that period, Marek Haltof states that ‘The most prominent trend [...] had to do with coming to terms with the communist past and uncovering historical moments buried or distorted by the communists.’<sup>xxii</sup> The pioneering study of Holocaust literature in Poland published in 1988, *Męczeństwo i zagłada Żydów w zapisach literatury polskiej* [The martyrdom and extermination of the Jews recorded in Polish literature], gives justice to this phenomenon since, next to the examples of Holocaust prose and poetry, the book provides quite a detailed overview of the Nazi infrastructure in Poland aimed at extermination of Jews during the Second World War.<sup>xxiii</sup> These were most likely unknown to the contemporary reader due to the fifty years of Polonisation of the Holocaust and the absence of narratives discussing Jewish suffering.<sup>xxiv</sup> A literary example which deals with this ‘organized silence’, regarding not only the Holocaust but also the postwar Polish-Jewish relations, is Pawel Huelle’s *Who Was David Weiser?* (1987).<sup>xxv</sup> The search and investigation into an unexplained disappearance of a Jewish boy, David Weiser, somewhere in the suburbs of Gdańsk in the early 1960s, can be read as a metaphor for the Jewish absence in the Polish collective memory and as an expression of the artistic inquiry into the status of Jewish culture in Poland more broadly. The ambiguous portrayal of David encourages this interpretation of Huelle’s story since we learn that maybe David Weiser ‘had been there a few minutes,’ or ‘he’d been there forever.’<sup>xxvi</sup> The story conveys Weiser as a metaphor of Jewish culture which is waiting to be discovered, evidenced in the following metanarrative remark ‘For Weiser could have been waiting for us from the very start, and perhaps that’s really the most essential thing in this story.’<sup>xxvii</sup> Through introducing the fragments of David’s family history, such as his grandfather Abraham whose ‘people had vanished from Europe,’<sup>xxviii</sup> the book touches upon the physical disappearance of Jewish communities across Europe caused by the Holocaust but also the process of obliteration of Jewish heritage after the war. Huelle’s narrator, in a quest to learn about his mysterious classmate, gets hold of Weiser’s school registration form only to find an empty space for the

place of birth and ‘dashes’ in the fields marked as ‘mother’ and ‘father.’ The dashes signify what is unknown, the ominous erasure from history and from memory. ‘Instead of becoming clearer, things are even more complicated,’ he concludes his search.<sup>xxix</sup> In addition to addressing the Jewish absence, Huelle engages with another taboo issue, the deeply ingrained antisemitism,<sup>xxx</sup> through the portrayal of David’s treatment by other school children who chant after him: ‘David is a Yi-id!’ One of the boys taking part in the harassing reflects upon his actions: ‘as soon as it had been said we felt our old antipathy towards him, fast growing into hatred, because he wasn’t one of us.’<sup>xxxi</sup>

An essay by Jan Błoński, “The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto” published in the same year as Huelle’s novel, demonstrates the symptoms of dealing with the questions about Polish ‘antipathy’ towards Jews and with their ‘double absence’: on the one hand, with the physical void resulting from the extermination, on the other hand, absence due to the repressed and distorted memory of the Jewish Holocaust in the socialist Poland.<sup>xxxii</sup> Błoński’s essay tackles the Polish complicity in the Holocaust, the organized forgetting and collective guilt. It seems that many historians, artists and writers, took up his important dictum, thus indicating the birth of a new paradigm of memory:

We must stop haggling, trying to defend and justify ourselves. We must stop arguing about the things which were beyond our power to do, during the occupation and beforehand. Nor must we place blame on political, social, and economic conditions. We must say first of all - Yes, we are guilty.

The questions posed by Błoński in his essay relate to emotional aspects evoked by the tragic historical events, in this case, the disappearance of the entire ethnic minority and its culture from the landscape of Poland. That emotional layer can be hard to grasp within the traditional historical accounts and representations of the Holocaust, particularly that it regards, what Nora

described as ‘privileged memory’ of a minority group, which ‘without commemorative vigilance’ could soon be swept away by history.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Literature on the other hand, has many means at hand and therefore it should be considered particularly capable of representing such cultures and groups to prevent the collapse of their memory. Before moving to this particular aspect of his theoretical interpretation of memory, it is important to note how Nora’s concept of *lieu de memoire*, at its inception signifying ambiguity of sites of memory existing ‘between history and memory, between institutional commemoration and private or communal understanding of the past’ was quickly appropriated to describe the physical sites of commemoration. As Douglas Smyth states in an excellent discussion about the hijacking of Nora’s, and his team’s, concept: ‘[it] was quickly recuperated by the burgeoning heritage culture that developed in advance of the Bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989, and the term *lieu de memoire* quickly entered everyday language as a synonym for the very thing it was meant to call into question, namely the physical monument or memorial.’<sup>xxxiv</sup> What makes something a site of memory, stresses Nora, is ‘a will to remember’ and imagination which ‘invests it with a symbolic aura’<sup>xxxv</sup>; such understanding goes beyond simply historical objects of memory onto the ‘places’ which ‘escape from history.’<sup>xxxvi</sup> Nora’s insights about literature as a site of memory, reveal most poignantly his intention. Precisely because of its possibility for ambiguity, literature has been one of the most faithful *lieux de memoire*. Some issues and themes, Nora notes, are ‘ill suited to expression in categories of traditional historiography.’<sup>xxxvii</sup> For instance, it is hard for history to account for the, above illustrated, attempts to recover the felt absence of the memory, because it lacks concrete referents in reality. Whereas *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory, do not need a specific referent in reality. It does not mean they are ‘without content, physical presence, history’; what makes them sites of memory is the very fact they ‘escape from memory.’<sup>xxxviii</sup> The absence purported by the active forgetting and the experience of a void after millions of people have perished in the Holocaust escapes from



history but finds its way into the literary narratives. Indeed, as Nora points out historical accounts become revitalized through literature; consequently, the boundary between literature and history often becomes blurred. This is particularly true for the works of literature which deal with Jedwabne of which horrific events inspired a number of literary, and other, artistic representations. Noticeably, these works draw closely from historic materials, e.g. photographs, documentaries, witness accounts and historical narratives, transforming them, through artistic vision, into texts that deal with moral questions but, most importantly, express preoccupation with and particular sensibilities about representing and honoring the memory of the dead.

### **Poetry after Jedwabne**

Even though Błoński's essay was widely talked about in Poland, it was in spring 2000 when Poland looked into the Holocaust's 'heart of darkness' for the first time, with the news about the massacres in Jedwabne and nearby towns.<sup>xxxix</sup> A number of articles in the Polish press, followed by the publication of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbours. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland 1941*, described the killing of hundreds of Jews in the Łomża region by the ethnic Poles, their neighbours.<sup>xl</sup> These publications provoked investigation by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN)<sup>xli</sup> and, most importantly, an unprecedented national debate about Polish-Jewish relations during the war, to a great extent changing 'the social consciousness' about the topic.<sup>xlii</sup> The impact of Jedwabne's public discussion<sup>xliii</sup> on cultural production in Poland could only be compared to that provoked by Theodor Adorno's 1950s critique of cultural barbarism concluded in his famous phrase about poetry after Auschwitz<sup>xliv</sup>; now, the Polish society was looking into the uncomfortable, if not unbearable, truth of the 1941 pogroms and the unspeakable barbarism of their countrymen who took part

in them. As a result, many previously accepted truths were abolished, as in Gross's own words summarising his inquiry:

After Jedwabne the issue of Polish-Jewish relations during the war can no longer be put to rest with such ready-made formulas. Indeed, we have to rethink not only wartime but also postwar Polish history, as well as reevaluate certain important interpretive themes widely accepted as explanations accounting for outcomes, attitudes, and institutions of those years.<sup>xlv</sup>

It is crucial to stress the extent to which learning about Jedwabne came as a shock, in particular to the generations born long after the war, who had only fragmentary knowledge about the events of the Second World War, with the dominant narrative being that of Polish victimhood and bravery. For many, Jedwabne turned into traumatic knowledge: it is a trauma resulting from learning about a painful or difficult to accept truth.<sup>xlvi</sup> The literary, but also cinematic, production following the revelation of the full story of the pogroms clearly illustrate the symptoms of dealing with this trauma.

Closely based on the 1941 events is Tadeusz Śłobodzianek's drama *Our Class* (Pol. *Nasza klasa*; 2008),<sup>xlvii</sup> in which, at the beginning of the text, the author acknowledges all major historical sources related to the pogroms that informed the story, among them Gross's book and Anna Bikont's Jedwabne reportage, both containing the accounts of those who witnessed the massacres.<sup>xlviii</sup> *Our Class*, a story of a group of classmates, both Christian and Jewish, presents Polish-Jewish relations during the period spanning nearly a hundred years, from the beginning of the 1920s to early 2000: we meet the characters when they are children and watch them grow, their fate intertwined with the major historical events of the twentieth century which have its local impact.<sup>xlix</sup> The metaphor of classmates is a powerful one as it, first of all, allows Śłobodzianek to convey the shared past of the Poles and Jews, going against the

separation of both communities fuelled by the Nazi racial propaganda, and later purported by the communist authorities who, by negligence of their memory, wrote the Jews out of Polish history and culture.<sup>1</sup> Here, the characters remain forever tied to each other by the fact of being former school buddies which presumably adds an extra emotive layer to the tragic fate of those who were murdered. During his anthropological study of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland, Jonathan Webber came to the realisation that memory is not located in what is 'physically verifiable' but, rather, relates to what people can remember; in that sense, the bonds formed at school appeared to have a long-lasting effect on memory.<sup>li</sup> In a conversation about the drama, which has become the most staged in the world play by a Polish author,<sup>lii</sup> Słobodzianek admitted the main inspiration for the story was the collection of photographs featuring the school children, perpetrators and victims from Jedwabne, which left him with haunting impressions.<sup>liii</sup> *Our Class* was born from the difficult to put to rest questions while confronting the reality of the Jedwabne killing, i.e. moral and ethical responsibility, or lack of thereof, the nature of evil and the fluid line between victims and perpetrators. Two features of Słobodzianek's treatment of memory are particularly noteworthy. First is the cautious dealing with the horrific murder of the Jews staged by the ethnic Poles evidenced in the names, and other characters' features which were borrowed from the stories of the actual perpetrators and victims from Jedwabne and Radziłów.<sup>liv</sup> The close proximity of the artistic representation to the historical documents about the pogroms testifies to the great efforts to not distort the recently uncovered truth, even though Słobodzianek's work can certainly be classified as the genre of fiction. The insistence on including the historiographical research in the story, at times, blurs the boundary between literature and historic narrative.<sup>lv</sup>

Aside from directly confronting the crime of genocide, *Our Class* addresses the problem of the absence of memories and mechanisms of forgetting – through fear, threats or, what Anna Bikont terms, the 'conspiracy of silence' – and their consequences.<sup>lvi</sup> In the story,

the characters who are perpetrators or indifferent bystanders, such as Rysiek, who raped his former classmate Dora before she was killed in the pogrom, are later accompanied by the ghosts of those whose death they witnessed. After the pogrom, a rushed wedding of Władek and Rachelka, who now has a Christian name, Marianna, ensues to protect her safety. Władek recounts the wedding:

WŁADEK: Our classmates were there. Most of them anyway.

ZYGMUNT: I was.

RYSIEK: So was I.

HENIEK: And me.

ZOCHA: Me too.

DORA: *I was also there.*

JAKUB KATZ: *As was I.*

ABRAM: I felt as though I was there.

MANACHEM: I wasn't there but Zocha told me all about it when she got home.<sup>lvii</sup>

Among the living guests present at the wedding there are two classmate-ghosts, Dora and Jakub, who had just been burned alive in the barn, with classmates Zygmunt, Rysiek, Heniek and Władek lighting the fire. The ghosts represent the perpetrators' guilty conscience and they will never leave them. The ghosts also provide a narrative vehicle to counter the amnesia about the Jewish community which perished; they are the carriers of the memory of the murdered Polish Jews and of those, whom violence forced into emigration, such as Abram, or Menachem hiding in Zocha's attic, yet both 'attending' the wedding.

Less known than *Our Class* is a drama by Piotr Rowicki, *Przylgnięcie* (*Clinging*; 2008). The two plays were written in the same year as a result of a workshop "The Art of Dialogue" (Sztuka Dialogu) dedicated to the history of Lublin Jews and readings of a famous Jewish play

by Szymon An-ski, *The Dybbuk* (1918).<sup>lviii</sup> Since the fall of communism, *The Dybbuk* has become ‘emblematic of the Polish quest to explore the meaning of the lost Jewish presence’ in Poland and has been staged in a great number of theatre productions.<sup>lix</sup> In Jewish folklore and popular belief, *dybbuk* (in Yiddish: דיבוק from the Hebrew verb דָּבַק *dābaq*, meaning “adhere” or “cling”) is an evil spirit, which enters into a living person, cleaves to their soul, talks through their mouth causing mental illness. *Przylgnięcie* tells the story of a man possessed by a *dybbuk* of a young Jewish girl murdered during the war. Rowicki explained he wanted to write a drama full of emotion which had the potential to shake spectators, yet, he is also concerned with the Polish/Jewish memory when he states that *Przylgnięcie* ‘is a story about searching for truth, about the collective amnesia, and how we treat our past.’<sup>lx</sup> It could be argued that the ghost embodies the traumatic or hard to bear reality of the killings during the pogroms, in which, as many accounts have it, some Jews were buried alive,<sup>lxi</sup> the ghost is a medium to deal with unimaginable atrocity. Rowicki’s play provided the basis for a screenplay of the 2015 film *Demon* by Marcin Wrona, a Polish-Israeli production, in which the ghost of a girl literally comes out of the pitch in the ground.<sup>lxii</sup> This nerve wrecking, highly visceral, scene is full of symbolism about dying alive (the ghost is both dead and alive), the ownership of the land (coming out of the soil) and looking for justice for those guilty of the crime (returning to hunt and possess). Discussing the role of Jewish ghosts in recent Polish fiction, Magdalena Waligórska observes that such a motif has, both, aesthetic and moral function; it enables one to write about the spaces of Jewish suffering, where hunting becomes a mean to come to terms with the traumatic knowledge, enabling retribution and restoration. ‘Jewish ghosts therefore return in Polish literature both to haunt spaces where anti-Jewish violence took place (and where it was forgotten) and to open the possibility of “healing” past injustices.’<sup>lxiii</sup> Waligórska looks at the examples of writing she termed ‘traumatic surrealism,’ a style represented in such fictional works as Andrzej Bart’s *Fabryka mucholapek* (*The Flytrap Factory*; 2008), Sylwia

Chutnik's *Kieszonkowy atlas kobiet* (*Pocket Atlas of Women*; 2008) and her play *Muranooo* (2012), Igor Ostachowicz's *Noc żywych Żydów* (*Night of the Living Jews*; 2012) or *Our Class*. All these works were published after 'Gross effect'<sup>lxiv</sup> and engage with the Polish-Jewish past, relying on the Jewish ghost topos. Significantly, these works feature real historical events of the Holocaust and therefore, can be viewed as dealing with a collective trauma, what, according to Waligórska, suggests an emerging 'paradigm of memory.'<sup>lxv</sup>

### **Re-judaising the Polish (literary) landscape**

After a decade of facing the truth about Jedwabne, a new type of fiction began to emerge with stories inhabited not just by Jewish ghosts, as also shown by Waligórska, but living Jewish characters. Acknowledging Poland's contribution to the horrors of the Holocaust enabled a process of reconciliation. This process gave way to questions of what was before the war allowing the writers to explore Jewish culture as integral to Poland's past, yet not glossed over because of guilt or nostalgia. This renewed interest in Jewish culture, manifested in the explosion of Jewish festivals, restoration of community sites, e.g. Kraków's Kazimierz district, synagogues and cemeteries, has been described by various scholars, such as Karen Underhill, as 'Jewish revival.' Underhill observes that in these new narratives, which emphasize Jewish belonging in Poland, Poland is no longer understood 'only as a place of Jewish death and destruction' but as a place of 'one thousand years of Jewish life.'<sup>lxvi</sup> Probably the most literal example of this shift has been embodied by the POLIN Museum ambitiously showcasing a thousand years of the history of Polish Jews, with the Museum built at the site of the former Warsaw ghetto, where many lost their lives.<sup>lxvii</sup> According to Underhill, these developments signify the changing place of the Holocaust memory 'within the longer picture of Polish/Jewish memory and history.'<sup>lxviii</sup>

Olga Tokarczuk's monumental work, *Księgi Jakubowe* (*The Books of Jacob*), is a nine hundred page 'great journey through seven borders, five languages and three major religions,' as explained in the baroque-styled title.<sup>lxi</sup> Tokarczuk reaches for a quite obscure story from the margins of Polish-Jewish history, centering her narrative on the figure of a self-proclaimed messiah, and a follower of Sabbatai Zewi, Jacob Joseph Frank (Pol. Jakub Lejbowicz Frank), who in the eighteenth century came from Smyrna to Podolia in Eastern Poland, and, under the guise of a great messianic revolution, convinced many to violate Jewish laws and forced them to convert to Christianity. Frank's eccentric personality and his adventurous journey, described in detail by Alexander Kraushar in his 1895 book dedicated to Frank's life,<sup>lxx</sup> lends a fascinating story in itself, however, Tokarczuk uses Frank's migration across borders and cultures to explore the social panorama and relations between different communities at the time, including the relations between Poles and Jews. The violence towards the Jews, whose scapegoating led to various pogroms at many points in Polish history – the memory of Chmielnicki's massacres being alive among the Polish Jews in the story – appears a recurrent motif of the book. In that sense, Tokarczuk's work can be seen echoing disputes about Jedwabne, particularly in the commentaries of the narrator who implies that the pogroms before, during and after the Second World War, were not unique occurrences but rather they resulted from the centuries old pattern of treatment of the Jewish minority in the territories of the Polish Republic, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

(...) after getting rid of the Swedish [ca.1655], on the ruins of destroyed and plundered towns, many were asking questions about who was guilty of all the suffering of *Respublica* [the Polish Republic], and again, the answer was that it was the Jews and other dissenters, who plotted with the invaders. And so the first to be harassed were the Arians and after that followed the Jewish pogroms.<sup>lxxi</sup>

Tokarczuk abolishes one of the most established myths about Poland's tolerance towards its multicultural and multiethnic citizens, exposing the divided society and oppression of Poland's religious minorities as well as peasants, who were merely slaves within the Polish feudal system. A subtle reference to memory appears already in the title of this great historic novel, 'narrated by the dead' and only 'complemented by the author,' who, nevertheless, consulted a great number of historical materials to create a story that teaches about history and re-evaluates it, at the same time.<sup>lxxii</sup> Speaking about the potential of fiction to produce historical consciousness, Astrid Erll notes that this can only be '*realised* in the process of reception,' therefore the meaning of the text, its message, must be looked at in the context of debates that it generates.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Furthermore, we shall not forget that the literary texts, which appear at a certain point in time, enter into a dialogue with other texts and debates on the subject they touch upon, hence its meaning is always produced through a cross-referenced reading. In that sense, *Księgi Jakubowe* indeed provides an extremely interesting example of fiction traveling beyond the borders of the text, which, together with its author, was at the center of a vicious public dispute that exposed conflicting visions of history, and, according to the author herself, the lack of readiness of Poles to face the 'dark areas of our history.'<sup>lxxiv</sup>

A completely new way of portraying Polish-Jewish life before the Holocaust is offered by the novel *Król* [The king] by Szczepan Twardoch, the tale of a Jewish boxer and paid killer, Jakub Szapiro. The story is told from the perspective of a 67-years-old Mojżesz Inbar (previously, Bernsztajn), now living in Israel, who revisits his childhood in an impoverished Jewish district in a pre-war Warsaw, and his encounters with Shapiro that forever changed his life. What is surprising about Twardoch's book is not only the bold, *Peaky-Blinders*-like<sup>lxxv</sup> portrayal of Polish-Jewish Warsaw in the 1930s, which, through normalisation of antisemitism, as well as inclusion of the episodes of Jewish antipathy towards the Poles (Jakub Szapiro), evidently breaks away with the mythologising and victimising mode of recounting the Jewish



history.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Highly original in Polish contemporary fiction is also Twardoch's exploration of the Polish-Jewish criminal underworld. These two features, namely its theme and the style, make *Król* a highly Singerian novel, with the author, most likely, consciously drawing from the literary style and legacy of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Indeed, the following criticism towards traditional Yiddish literature voiced by Singer seems to be taken up by Twardoch as *Król*'s literary formula: 'Yiddish literature ignored the Jewish underworld, the thousands and tens of thousands of thieves, pimps and prostitutes, and white slavers.'<sup>lxxvii</sup> In a similar fashion, Bashevis's greatest works grew out of looking into the past epochs, in the periods before the Holocaust where life could be explored in its full colors.<sup>lxxviii</sup> As Joanna Michlic observes, memory of the past 'reveals more about the current condition and self-image of society and its level of reflexivity over collective history' than about the past itself.<sup>lxxix</sup> Based on the analysis of the aforementioned Polish writers, one learns about a great desire, or perhaps a necessity, to explore and understand Jewish identity and, through that, Polish-Jewish history. That is evidenced in the writers demonstrating interest in Jewish heritage by drawing from Jewish folklore, inserting the elements of Jewish traditions (names of holidays, elements of traditional dress and references to the Torah) into their stories, or by demonstrating familiarity with Jewish laws. Indeed, these efforts have the potential to undo centuries of an 'estranged' Polish-Jewish relationship, which resulted in ignorance about each others' respective cultures.<sup>lxxx</sup> At the same time, we observe a backlash against this mode of memory that comes from the recently awakened nationalism fuelled by the populist propaganda, which, among hostility towards refugees and migrants, manifests itself in a renewed antisemitism.<sup>lxxxi</sup>

Finally, it is important to underline the role of the new generations of Polish Jewish writers normalising the Jewish identity in Poland, which, due to the physical absence or hiding of Jewish origin, has largely been unknown to the majority of contemporary Poles. Representing the voice of a third generation is Piotr Płaziński's *Pensjonat*, a short novel describing a journey

of a young man to a pension house outside Warsaw where the narrator used to spend time with his grandmother as a little boy, now returning to reconnect with some people there. Its residents are the Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust. Significantly, Płaziński's narrative registers the symptoms of the fragility of memory and gradual oblivion of the Jewish heritage, which has vanished and remnants of which are still vanishing. The narrator gets hold of a bundle of letters, written in Yiddish, wrapped in layers of newspapers. Letters from the postwar period are 'mixed together with electricity bills because everything is precious and you can't throw anything away'; the narrator's fears about their fate asking: 'Who will read them now?'

I sat there for an hour, not paying attention to Ms Tecia and trying to decipher the content of other bundles. The room was getting darker, and I didn't feel like getting up and turning on the chandelier. The letters on the paper, even though already hardly legible, were vanishing in the dusk. More and more have disappeared in the places where, just a moment ago, I could see their contours, even trying to team them up together into words, in order to capture their meaning – now, there was a void of torn parchment laying spread in front of me.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The metaphor of darkness, vanishing letters and inability to decipher them speak about the moral responsibility to *indeed* see, to attempt to decipher and to capture the 'disappearing' culture. There is no time to spare since there is less and less of those who lived here and those who could remember – the darkness is falling onto the remains of Jewish life in Poland. Such knowledge imposes an injunction and responsibility to remember, a task which, as was shown in this article, many writers took upon themselves. The movement from Auschwitz to Jedwabne indicates the shift in the process of thinking about and commemorating the Holocaust: from the tendency to present it as an entirely externally inflicted crime against Poles, to a more complex view which considers issues of collaboration with the Nazi

oppressors, or simply indifference to the plight of Jews, shared guilt and responsibility. Jedwabne sheds a new light on Auschwitz, which provoked a nuanced and critical reflection about Poland's past. As a landmark of a new phase of memory, Jedwabne left a long-lasting mark on literature as many writers continue to explore the Polish-Jewish past and by this, they show their will to remember. By doing so, they build intercultural dialogue, improving an understanding of shared Polish-Jewish history, something that politicians often fail to achieve.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Janko, *Mala Zagłada*, 105. Unless the given work has been translated into English, all excerpts from Polish press and literary works had been translated into English by the author of this article.

<sup>ii</sup> Kucia, "Auschwitz in the Perception," 191. According to Kucia, the narrative of the *Polish* martyrology was sealed by the 1947 'Act on the Remembrance of Martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim' where the name for the site as 'Auschwitz' was officially adopted.

<sup>iii</sup> Depending on the source, the number of victims is estimated at 1,600. See Polonsky, *The Neighbours Respond*, 353, see also Gross, *Neighbours*, 57. According to the documents of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) there were 340 'Polish citizens of Jewish nationality' killed in Jedwabne. See "Postanowienie," (Resolution), Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.

<sup>iv</sup> For the discussion on the role of social memory within the process of the political and social transformation in Poland after 1989 and emerging, conflicting, memory patterns (nostalgia for multicultural, multiethnic past vs. its ethno-nationalist vision) see Michlic, "The Dark Past," 21-39.

<sup>v</sup> The inclusion and rejection of certain narratives has been conveniently used by the politicians to reinterpret or, even, rewrite history. Notably, Jedwabne was at the centre of the presidential election campaign in 2015 with the then-candidate of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, Andrzej Duda, questioning the 'apologetic' politics of memory adopted by his predecessor, Bronisław Komorowski, what, in Duda's view was destroying the 'real historical memory.' See "Debata kandydatów. Wybory prezydenckie 2015."

<sup>vi</sup> Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, xiii.

<sup>vii</sup> See Kowalska, "Zawodowy tęsknicie!" [The profession of longing]. Betlejewski describes the absence of the Jews as a subject when he was growing up during the 1980s. Reading about Jedwabne he described as a 'cognitive shock': 'Like a grenade [it] caused confusion in my thinking and revealed the scale of my ignorance'. The article describes social happening 'Tęsknię za tobą Żydzie!' (I miss you Jew), initiated by Betlejewski in order to re-introduce Jewish presence into public spaces in Poland. For more discussion on Betlejewski's project of urban nostalgia see also Waligórska, "Stettin, Szczecin", 90.

<sup>viii</sup> Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę* [Recounting the holocaust], 14.

<sup>ix</sup> For the remaining part of this paper, I use the term 'Holocaust' with a reference to, among others, J.T. Gross's understanding of the term, that is Holocaust as not only the planned extermination of the Jews by Nazi Germany but also the more chaotic and spontaneous pogroms carried out by the local population.

<sup>x</sup> In doing so, I challenge Przemysław Czapliński's claim that the enormity of the Holocaust literature becomes an injunction to any systematising attempts. Precisely because of that, efforts should be made to show the variety of possible approaches and perspectives to analyse the Holocaust literature. See Czapliński, "Zagłada jako wyzwanie," 9.

<sup>xi</sup> Kulesza, "Polish camp literature," 23. Kulesza discusses the significance of Tadeusz Borowski's camp prose and the differences in recording the camp experience domestically and during emigration. See also Sucharski "Literatura Holocaustu."

<sup>xii</sup> Maciejewska, *Męczeństwo i zagłada Żydów*, 22-23.

<sup>xiii</sup> See, for example, Grynberg, "Drohobycz, Drohobycz." Grynberg is also the author of the first ever study about Polish Holocaust literature. In here, he notes that since the Polish writers were the first 'among the literary community' to be eyewitnesses to the genocide, they were the first to introduce this theme to fiction. For more

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details about the works of the postwar writers and how they developed new literary means of expression when dealing with the Holocaust see Grynberg, "The Holocaust in Polish Literature."

<sup>xiv</sup> Both, Głowiński's and Krall's works have been translated into English. In his collection of short stories, *Black Seasons*, Głowiński returns to the traumatic memories of living under a hidden identity in Warsaw during the Nazi German occupation. See Głowiński, *Black Seasons* and Krall *Chasing the King*.

<sup>xv</sup> Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 1.

<sup>xvi</sup> Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, 187. Other terms used are 'second generation' or 'generation after'. See Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 3. Among the second generation writers writing in the Polish language most notable are Michał Głowiński and Hanna Krall (see note 14).

<sup>xvii</sup> The title of the English translation by Jennifer Croft, due to appear in August 2019.

<sup>xviii</sup> In cases where the work exists in English already, I use an English text as a point of reference throughout this article.

<sup>xix</sup> Since 2016, we also begin to observe a gradual implementation of the new state approach to memory and commemoration characterised by the hostile or suspicious attitude towards the narratives that can threaten 'the good image of Poland', embodied more recently in the 2018 passing of the IPN bill, commonly referred to as a 'Polish Holocaust law'. The direction of the state's cultural policies is reflected in the support for the nationalistically oriented art productions while marginalising the narratives which challenge the heroic image of Poles during the Second World War. See Perlson, "Artists React." For an excellent documentary about the Polish authorities' censorship of art see Bondaronek, "Exodus".

<sup>xx</sup> Erll and Rigney, "Literature and the Production," 112.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>xxii</sup> Haltof, Marek. *Polish Film*, 217.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Maciejewska, *Męczeństwo i zagłada Żydów*, 5-9. See also Krupa, *Polska proza i historiografia*, 12. It is worth mentioning that nearly 30 years after publication of Maciejewska's book, a new ambitious, three volume study about the Holocaust in Polish literature is being prepared by a group of Polish scholars. The first volume covering the period from 1939-1968 was published in 2016. See Buryła, *Literatura polska*.

<sup>xxiv</sup> For a particular case study of the Polonising narrative of the Holocaust see the chapter "De-Polonizing "Oświęcim" by Judaizing Auschwitz" In Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 112-120.

<sup>xxv</sup> Other noteworthy publications of fiction which demonstrate renewed interest in the Holocaust in the 1980s are Szczypiorski's *Początek* (The beginning) published in 1986, Szewc's *Annihilation* (Zagłada; 1987), a 'nostalgic prose', or Marek Rymkiewicz, *Umschlagplatz*, published in 1988. See Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę*, 13.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Huelle, *Who Was David*, 7.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>xxx</sup> My spelling of 'antisemitism' has been informed by the document 'Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism' by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, April 2015.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Huelle, *Who Was David*, 7.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See Błoński, "The Poor Poles." Błoński's essay (in Polish "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto"), appeared in *Tygodnik Powszechny* No. 2/87, challenging the historical narrative and making the communist party 'seethe with indignation'. Michał Głowiński writes about it: "Rarely in the history of writing has there been an example of such a relatively brief contribution by someone not in authority, not at the head of a huge institution, and speaking, moreover, solely in his own name, that has had such a profound impact in some area of public life." See Głowiński "Błoński's Essay".

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Nora, "Between Memory," 12.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Smith, "Debating Cultural Topography," 35.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Nora, "Between Memory," 19.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Nora, "Between Memory," 24

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxix</sup> The subject of the pogrom was earlier explored in Paweł Łoziński's film *Miejsce urodzenia* (Birthplace; 1992). In the documentary, Łoziński, who himself comes from a Polish-Jewish family, follows writer and a Holocaust survivor, Henryk Grynberg, returning to Poland to confront the killers of his father and brother. Grynberg described the journey to the Polish village and the macabre discovery of the remains of his relatives in a book *Dziedzictwo* [Legacy].

<sup>xl</sup> It has been wrongly assumed that it was Gross's book that first spread the news about the Jedwabne pogrom, while the author of this article first read about it in Andrzej Kaczyński's long piece "Całopalenie" [a literal translation of the Greek, *holo-caustos*], published by a Polish daily, *Rzeczpospolita*, on the 5th of May 2000. *Rzeczpospolita* published excerpts of Gross's book which came out later that month.

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<sup>xli</sup> The outcome of this scientific investigation was published in two volumes by IPN in 2002. See Machcewicz, *Wokół Jedwabnego* [About Jedwabne].

<sup>xlii</sup> Andrzej Kaczyński describes Gross's book as the most discussed book of the first decade of the 21st century: 'between the autumn of 2000 and 2002 there was not a day in which media would not comment on the book'. See Kaczyński, "O "Sąsiadach"".

<sup>xliii</sup> For an overview of the major voices published in the Polish press see Polonsky, *The Neighbors Respond*.

<sup>xliv</sup> The full sentence in which the phrase appeared is: 'Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today.' See Adorno, "Cultural Criticism," 34.

<sup>xlv</sup> Gross, *Neighbours*, 139.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Apart from the aforementioned Betlejewski (see note 6), a playwright, Tadeusz Słobodzianek, born in 1955, describes the pain he endured while reading about Jedwabne in Gross' book. See Zielińska, "Tadeusz Słobodzianek".

<sup>xlvii</sup> The play, directed by Bijana Sheibani, had its first premiere on the 24th of September 2009, in The National Theatre in London. See Spencer "Our Class".

<sup>xlviii</sup> Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence*.

<sup>xlix</sup> See an excellent text exploring the drama, which touches upon issues of Polish/Jewish memory in Vickers, "Constructing a Memory," 203-224.

<sup>1</sup> For issues of appropriation of the Holocaust memory by the communist government see for example Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*; Głowacka, *Imaginary Neighbors*; Polonsky, *The Neighbors Respond*.

<sup>li</sup> This view has been confirmed by Webber's elderly interviewees who, fifty years after the end of German occupation, remembered the names of the Jews in the village: 'they had been to school with them and could remember their names as if it was yesterday'. See Webber, "A Jew, a Cemetery," 238.

<sup>lii</sup> Since its 2009 premiere in London, *Our Class* was staged in countries like Canada, various cities in the United States, Spain, Italy, Czech Republic, Japan, Brazil, Sweden, Israel, Hungary, Lithuania or Denmark. See "Nasza Klasa w Nowym Jorku" (Our Class in New York).

<sup>liii</sup> Słobodzianek elaborates about the photographs: 'I looked at them for hours and I wondered what were these children doing on the 10th of July and later. Which ones died in the barn? And which ones herded others to the barn with sticks?' [Patrzyłem na nie godzinami i zastanawiałem się, co robiły te dzieci 10 lipca i potem? Które z nich zginęło w stodole? A które do stodoły okutym kijem zaganiało?] See Zielińska, "Tadeusz Słobodzianek."

<sup>liv</sup> The characters' names most likely inspired by those of real personas from the witness testimonies are those of Menachem (Menachem Finkelshtein, one of the survivors of the pogrom), Heniek (Henryk Dziekoński known for his brutality towards the Jews) or Dora (Dvojrą Pecynowicz). True also is a story of a Pole, Stanisław Romatowski, who saved a Jewish woman, Rachelka Finkelstein, whom he later married after she converted to Christianity. They feature in *Our Class* as the characters, Władek and Rachelka (later Marianna). See Gross, *Neighbours*, 70.

<sup>lv</sup> It is interesting to note that precisely because of its proximity to the historical accounts, the play has been sometimes read as a history lesson. See Cavendish, "Is Our Class."

<sup>lvi</sup> Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence*, 151. Bikont's book accounts for the history of the pogroms in Jedwabne, Radziłów and Wąsosz, however its real focus is the phenomenon of silence around these crimes maintained for sixty years, that is, until the publication of Gross's *Neighbours*.

<sup>lvii</sup> Słobodzianek, *Our Class*, 59. My emphasis.

<sup>lviii</sup> The workshop, 'Jews of the Lublin District' was organized by Laboratorium Dramatu (Drama Laboratory), an artistic-educational institution established and led by Słobodzianek.

<sup>lix</sup> Steinlauf, "The Dybbuk". See also Tokarska-Bakir, "O czymś, co zginęło."

<sup>lx</sup> Rowicki, *Przylgnięcie*.

<sup>lxi</sup> For example Menachem Finkelsztajn in his witness testimony about Wąsosz pogrom provides the following horrific detail: 'Before burial the girl opened her eyes and sat up—clearly she had just lost consciousness from the beating—but the murderers did not pay attention and buried her alive.' See Gross, *Neighbours*, 67.

<sup>lxii</sup> The evil spirit translates in Polish as "demon", and *Demon* offers yet another interpretation of the Jewish legend. The film, together with many other recent cinematic productions in Poland, e.g. the film *Ida* (2013) by Paweł Pawlikowski and *Pokłosie* (The Aftermath; 2012) by Władysław Pasikowski, are concerned with the legacy of the Holocaust, Jewish pogroms, and coming to terms with Poland's dark past. These films provoked heated debates about Polish history during the Second World War, particularly the collective memory, or rather, collective amnesia, which describes a selective memory of the past.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Waligórska, "Healing by Hunting," 222.

<sup>lxiv</sup> A reference to the enormous interest Gross's book provoked in Poland, see Michlic "The Dark Past," 26.

<sup>lxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

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<sup>lxvi</sup> Underhill, “Re-Judaizing the Polish,” 694.

<sup>lxvii</sup> The POLIN museum’s role described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as a bridge between life and death, a narrative supported by its architectural features, mirrors Underhill’s claim: ‘Facing the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes on the site of the Warsaw ghetto and prewar Jewish neighbourhood, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews completes the memorial complex. At the monument, we honour those who died by remembering how they died. At the museum, we honour them – and those who came before and after – by remembering how they lived’. See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Historical Space.” 147.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Underhill, “Re-Judaizing the Polish,” 694.

<sup>lxix</sup> Tokarczuk, *Księgi Jakubowe*.

<sup>lxx</sup> Kraushar, Alexander. *Frank i frankiści polscy 1726-1816. Monografia historyczna osnuta na źródłach archiwalnych i historycznych* [Jacob Frank and the Polish Frankists 1726-1816. Historical monography based on archival and historical materials]. Tom 1. Sandomierz: Wydawnictwo Armoryka, 2015

<sup>lxxi</sup> Tokarczuk, *Księgi Jakubowe*, 765-764.

<sup>lxxii</sup> The educational purpose of the novel is implied in the title. I would consider its content highly significant for the general framework of the story: ‘Mądrym dla Memoryału, Kompatriotom dla Refleksji, Laikom dla Nauki, Melancholikom zaś dla Rozrywki’ [To the clever for memory, to the compatriots for reflection, to the laymen for education and to the melancholics for entertainment]. Tokarczuk, *Księgi Jakubowe*.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Erll, “Literature, Film,” 395.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Armitstead, “Olga Tokarczuk.”

<sup>lxxv</sup> This reference was inspired by the version of *Król*, directed by Monika Strzępka and staged in Teatr Polski (Polish Theatre) in Warsaw. The soundtrack of the popular UK gangster drama *Peaky Blinders* was used in that version of the play.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> The topic appears frequently in the discussions about mythologisation of the *shtetl*. See Rothenberg, “Demythologizing the shtetl.”

<sup>lxxvii</sup> See: Singer, *Love and Exile*, 86. Singer repeatedly commented on the need to include the Jewish underworld in the stories about the Jewish past, warning against idealising and, as a result, distorting it.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> For an overview of Singer’s literary outlook, and Yiddish writers in Warsaw more broadly, see for examples Stępień “The Role of the Association.”

<sup>lxxix</sup> Michlic, “The Dark Past,” 21.

<sup>lxxx</sup> We also need to acknowledge similar efforts by the Israeli artists during that period, for example an extremely imaginative Polish-language film project by Yael Bartana about the Jewish Resistance Movement in Poland, *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007-2011), which borrows from Israeli and Polish symbols, both real and fictional material, to re-imagine and re-evaluate historical events.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> The antisemitic comments were addressed at Teatr Polski’s poster for the stage version of *Król* which features a star of David with a crown on top. It has been vandalised multiple times. See Jagielski “Plakat “Króla” zniszczony.”

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Paziński, *Pensjonat*, 24. My translation.

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# **(Re-)visualizing the ‘Heart of Hell’? Representations of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando in the Art of David Olère and *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015)**

## **Abstract:**

This paper discusses recurrent debates over whether there are limits in representing the Holocaust, in relation to the gas chambers and Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, with particular reference to art by the survivor David Olère [1902-1985], who was a member of the Sonderkommando, and László Nemes’ critically acclaimed, yet controversial, feature film *Saul fia* (*Son of Saul*).

**Keywords:** **To be added**

It is frequently claimed that certain aspects of the Holocaust cannot or should not, be known, shown or even imagined.<sup>i</sup> Geoffrey Hartman explores the ‘possibility of reticence, that there are things that should not be represented,’<sup>ii</sup> whilst Susan Crane advocates ‘choosing not to look.’<sup>iii</sup> Whether it is possible and/or legitimate to cross the threshold of the gas chamber, either in the form of seeking to reconstruct, or imaginatively represent, what happened there, is a recurrent preoccupation in debates over the limits of representation. The creators of the Holocaust section of Warsaw’s acclaimed *POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews*, suggest there is a point beyond which the visitor, however empathic, cannot, and should not seek to, go:

The visitor can accompany the victims on their way, and he or she can try to grasp their isolation, feelings of abandonment, uncertainty, fear, despair, and suffering. He or she is also able to see what kind of moral and existential dilemmas the victims faced.

But we cannot follow the victims to the very end. We must part with them on the threshold of the gas chambers. The victims enter there alone, and we remain outside.

In our view, the awareness of this impassable barrier is one of the most important experiences we can have as witnesses of the Holocaust.<sup>iv</sup>

Michael Berenbaum articulates a similar perspective in the documentary *Nazi Scrapbooks: The Auschwitz Albums*, insisting ‘we will never know what it was like to be inside that gas chamber. There is a domain that forever eludes us. That’s the fascination, but that’s also the zone of privacy.’ In his self-appointed role as guardian of the limits of representation, Claude Lanzmann provocatively maintained that had he ‘discovered a hypothetical silent film shot by an SS officer showing the death of some 3,000 people in a gas chamber, not only would I not have included it in my film, I would have destroyed it.’<sup>v</sup> Insofar as we know, no such film exists. What is controversial is Lanzmann’s insistence that the very idea of such a film, or the creation of images that seek to go beyond the threshold of the gas chamber, should be taboo, and he regularly attacked representations that he considered transgressed this prohibition, such as the shower scene in *Schindler’s List*. For Lanzmann the closest we can approach to this ‘heart of hell’<sup>vi</sup> is via the testimony of the Sonderkommando hence their pivotal role in his film *Shoah*. As far as Gideon Greif, who served as historical advisor on *Son of Saul*, is concerned, ‘the victims themselves cannot talk anymore and only the survivors of the Sonderkommando can speak in their name and become their echo and voice, In this sense the survivors of the Sonderkommando are the guardian of the legacy of the killed.’<sup>vii</sup>

A preoccupation with the (in)adequacy of language to convey their experience is evident in many testimonies of the Holocaust, with a constant refrain being that only those who were ‘there’ can ‘know’ combined with an insistence that this experience is only partially

communicable. For Primo Levi the ‘true witnesses’ are those who ‘did not come back to tell, or they came back mute,’<sup>viii</sup> the *Muselmänner* whom, he argues, have ‘no story.’<sup>ix</sup> There is a preoccupation with whether it is possible to tell or represent what was intended to be ‘an event without a witness.’<sup>x</sup> However, as this paper will demonstrate, the testimony (both written and visual, as in the art of David Olère) of the Sonderkommando, and subsequent attempts to represent them and their experience, often simultaneously both challenge and reinforce claims that the Holocaust was (intended to be) an ‘event without a witness’) and is an experience that is, at its heart, both unsayable, unrepresentable, and potentially, with a gulf separating insider (the witness) and outsider (the hearer or viewer) that both parties are ultimately unable to bridge.

Henryk Mandelbaum, a Polish Jewish member of the Sonderkommando, reflects on the specific difficulties of bearing witness for those who, as *Geheimnisträger* (bearers of secrets) feared they were the ‘last Jews,’ the living dead, certain that it was a matter of when and how they would be killed, rather than if. Mandelbaum fears the gulf in experience is such that it precludes his audience from ever fully understanding what he strives to communicate:

I often wonder why I talk about all this. You know, if you didn’t live through it, there’s no way you can understand it. And since you don’t understand, it goes in one ear and out the other. No one except our Sonderkommando can grasp what happened. Maybe only the stars at night. And the woods still growing there today.<sup>xi</sup>

Mandelbaum and a number of his fellow Sonderkommando nevertheless felt obligated to chronicle their experiences to ensure they, the dead, and the nature of their deaths, became a matter of public record and would not be forgotten, or prove to be the ‘last link in the chain of memory.’<sup>xii</sup> Whatever reservations they may have had about their ability to communicate such experiences effectively, the testimonies of the Sonderkommando (both written and visual) are

often harrowingly explicit, providing forensically detailed, accounts of the killing process. The decision to compose then bury accounts, as well as material evidence (in the form of teeth), in the grounds of the crematoria was often rooted in a conviction that what they had to say mattered and a determination that their 'secret' knowledge would outlive, rather than die, with them, and contain sufficient evidence to 'scream the truth at the world.'<sup>xiii</sup> Yet, we must also recognize that the testimonies we **do** have are potentially the exception, because they represent only a fraction of those employed in the Sonderkommando,<sup>xiv</sup> the majority of whom died leaving no trace or 'voice' behind as a window, however slight, to mark the 'scorched vestiges' of their passing.<sup>xv</sup>

Whilst the significance of such testimonies is increasingly acknowledged the precise role the Sonderkommando played in facilitating the killing process continues to be a subject of debate. The extreme nature of their situation serves to further exacerbate already complex questions concerning the nature of victimhood, choice, privilege, complicity, collaboration and resistance during the Holocaust. For Stephen Applebaum the Sonderkommando remain 'one of the most controversial and sensitive issues in Jewish history,'<sup>xvi</sup> whilst Aaron Kerner suggests that 'aligning our gaze with the Sonderkommando complicates the clear distinction between the perpetrator's gaze and the victim's gaze.'<sup>xvii</sup> Omer Bartov is more conflicted in concluding that the Sonderkommando were 'the most deeply complicit and at the same time the most heroic Jews of the Holocaust.'<sup>xviii</sup> A recurrent thread in the extensive promotional campaign accompanying the release of *Son of Saul* debated the merits of a journalist's claim during a press conference that the Sonderkommando were 'half-victim, half-hangman.'<sup>xix</sup> The Sonderkommando were acutely conscious of such negative views and self-justification is a recurrent theme in both the buried texts and testimonies by surviving members of the Sonderkommando.<sup>xx</sup>

Primo Levi's influential reflections on the Sonderkommando in relation to the 'grey zone' are deeply ambivalent: he refers to them as 'an extreme case of collaboration,'<sup>xxi</sup> whilst simultaneously asserting that 'envisioning and organising the squads was National Socialism's most diabolical crime,' precisely because the Nazis sought 'to shift the burden of guilt to others, that is, to the victims, so that not even the awareness that they were innocent was left to bring them relief.'<sup>xxii</sup> As a consequence, for Levi, 'our need and ability to judge falter before the Sonderkommandos,'<sup>xxiii</sup> and he invites his readers to 'ponder' on their fate with 'compassion and rigour, but that judgment of them be suspended,'<sup>xxiv</sup> reflecting his conviction that 'no one has the authority to judge them, not those who experienced the Lager and, especially, not those who did not.'<sup>xxv</sup> Greif expresses no such ambivalence, describing the Sonderkommando as 'the most tragic figures and the most woeful individuals in the history of the Holocaust. They were the most miserable of the miserable.'<sup>xxvi</sup> He actively seeks to protect their memory by endorsing those representations of the Sonderkommando which he considers to be accurate, and sensitive to their extreme context (e.g., *Son of Saul*) whilst quick to condemn those he deems historically inaccurate and/or distorted (e.g., *The Grey Zone*). Lanzmann is similarly quick to defend the Sonderkommando insisting that they were 'noble figures, at once heroes and martyrs' who 'never gave up their humanity.'<sup>xxvii</sup>

### **David Olère's artistic representations of the SK:**

Olère was a Polish Jewish artist who left Warsaw in 1918. He settled in Paris in 1923, married, had a son and worked designing costumes, film sets and publicity posters. He was arrested on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1943 and deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on 2<sup>nd</sup> March. Olère worked in the Sonderkommando. Because of his fluency in languages he translated British radio broadcasts for the SS, and, more informally, wrote letters home for them, utilizing his skills as an illustrator and calligrapher. Olère was evacuated from Auschwitz on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1945, and was finally



liberated from Ebensee on 6<sup>th</sup> May. On returning to Paris he produced over 50 sketches, between 1945-1947, which serve as a ‘visual memoir’<sup>xxviii</sup> of his experiences in Auschwitz, the death marches, Mauthausen and its subcamps. Olère’s art is diverse, ranging from plans and sketches of the gas chambers and crematoria, to more stylized, emotional, even accusatory works. A number feature Olère himself as participant or as observer/witness. According to Serge Klarsfeld, who was commissioned by Olère’s family to promote awareness of his work and facilitate the dissemination of his artworks:

the documentary value of Olère’s paintings is extremely high. No photographs were taken of what went on inside the crematoria. Only his eyes and his hands were able to reconstruct the terrible truth. He is often present in his own pictures, a ghostly figure, a horrified witness, observing those inhuman scenes that he could not remove from his visually photographic memory.<sup>xxix</sup>

Yet, if Olère’s work is so exceptional and of such historical significance, why is it that there have been relatively few exhibitions of his work to date, and he is often only mentioned in passing, if at all, in many discussions of Holocaust art, Auschwitz or studies of the Sonderkommando?<sup>xxx</sup> Is it because of the disturbingly graphic nature of many of his depictions of the work of the Sonderkommando and the brutality and sadism of the SS? For Klarsfeld ‘Olère is the only painter in the world who has seen it all and was never acknowledged,’ possibly because his art ‘seemed to repel his audience more than attract it.’<sup>xxxi</sup> *Lohamei Haghetat*, which has a significant proportion of Olère’s art in its collection, suggests ‘the drama that infuses the drawings is considered excessive by those who find it difficult to comprehend the exceptional events,’<sup>xxxii</sup> a coded reference perhaps to the more figurative aspects of his paintings. Some of Olère’s art could be held to transgress perceived boundaries of taste. There is no suggestion of reticence, of ‘choosing not to look,’ or a ‘zone of privacy’

here, most notably in his painting *Death by suffocation in the gas chamber caused by Zyklon B*.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Yet, it could be argued that if anyone has the knowledge, and therefore the ‘right,’ to imagine and portray the moment of death in a gas chamber it is a member of the Sonderkommando given the nature of their work, unless, that is, they are considered to be co-perpetrators and/or complicit in that murder. The explicit, graphic nature of some of Olère’s work, and one of the factors that makes it so disturbing, is precisely this refusal to look away, and he challenges viewers not to look away either.

In the case of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum the reason for not including art by Olère in their permanent exhibition was pragmatic: they only acquired their first painting by him in 2014. There is a reproduction of Olère’s painting *The Sonderkommando revolt* in the current French national exhibition, and *The food of the dead for the living* features in the new exhibition *The resistance at KL Auschwitz* which opened in Block 11 on 14 June 2018. Olère’s work also featured in two temporary exhibitions: one marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sonderkommando revolt (autumn 2004); the other, *Auschwitz. Death Factory. Topography and Daily Life of a Concentration and Extermination camp* (autumn 2016), was produced by Greif, Peter Siebers and the NS Documentation Centre, Cologne, in conjunction with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The latter now claims to have the largest collection of Olère’s paintings with the announcement in September 2017 of the acquisition of a further 18. As a result, it is now staging its own temporary exhibition, *David Olère. The One Who Survived Crematorium III* (October 30 2018-March 2019), which it claims is ‘the largest exhibition so far, depicting the moving paintings and drawings of the artist, presenting almost the entire exceptional work related to the artist’s traumatic experiences in the camp.’<sup>xxxv</sup> The staging of this exhibition demonstrates how interest in Olère’s art is growing. Such growing interest is also evident in *Lohamei Haghetat* making the sketches and sculptures in its collection more accessible via its online archive, as well as highlighting Olère as featured artist on their website

and staging a temporary exhibition of his work.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Olère's more documentary art features prominently in Yad Vashem's Holocaust History Museum (which opened in 2005), but, intriguingly, was not on display in its Holocaust Art Museum when I last visited in April 2017. His work has been utilised in recent documentaries<sup>xxxvii</sup> and to complement the narrative in Jan Południak, *Sonder: An Interview with Sonderkommando Member Henryk Mandelbaum* (2008) and Shlomo Venezia's *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz* (2009). Robert Jan van Pelt stressed the importance of sketches by Olère in his evidence as an expert witness for the Defence in the so-called 'Irving trial' (David Irving vs Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books), noting 'they provide a very important visual record of the design and operation of the gas chambers and incinerators of Crematorium 3, and they were made before information about that building was published'; a view subsequently endorsed by Lord Justice Gray.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

### **The Sonderkommando in *Son of Saul* (2005):**

Whilst Olère's graphic representations of the Sonderkommando are increasingly lauded as crucial documentary evidence, imaginative representations by those who were not Sonderkommando or Auschwitz survivors, are, it seems, viewed very differently. It has therefore been fascinating to study both the reception of *Son of Saul* and the ways in which Nemes, its director, explicitly positioned his approach within current debates over the limits of representation and the grey zone.

*Son of Saul* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2015 and won the Grand Prix. It subsequently received further accolades including Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (2016). The film attracted both fulsome praise and withering criticism. Gavin Smith, editor of *Film Comment*, described it as 'one of the most polarising films I've ever seen at Cannes, or perhaps anywhere,'<sup>xxxix</sup> publishing two responses, one for, one against, to

demonstrate the point.<sup>xli</sup> Greif hailed *Son of Saul* as ‘a great film, allowing us to feel the real atmosphere inside the gas chambers and crematoria,’ one that ‘gives us a decent, authentic picture on the “Sonderkommando.”’<sup>xlii</sup> To the surprise of some critics Lanzmann hailed *Son of Saul* as ‘a very new film, original, very unusual,’ one ‘done with great modesty,’<sup>xliii</sup> but was quick to qualify this by pointing out that ‘it’s a film about the Sonderkommando, not a film about the gas chambers,’ adding the rider that ‘nobody can testify about the gas chambers. You would need witnesses and there are no witnesses of what happened inside the gas chambers. But as a film about the life of the Sonderkommando, I think it’s very good.’<sup>xliii</sup>

Both Greif and Geza Röhrig (the actor who played Saul) define an ‘authentic’ film about the Sonderkommando as one that refrains from criticising or judging, but rather helps ‘us to understand, that these miserable men were no criminals – but victims.’<sup>xliv</sup> Yet it is important to remember, as Greif himself acknowledges, that the Sonderkommando were far from homogenous in their response to the situation in which they found themselves.<sup>xlv</sup> Some are willing to pass judgement on the behaviour of their fellow Sonderkommando, and/or hint at a more variegated, complex and potentially darker and more troubling reality. For example, Maurice Venezia baldly states ‘we became animals,’ adding that his memories still ‘haunt’ him.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The positive response of Lanzmann, Greif and many critics to *Son of Saul* is, at least in part, because Nemes went to considerable lengths to endorse the view that certain aspects of the Holocaust cannot, and should not, be recreated or represented. For example, he recalled: ‘I forbid myself from representing the face of horror or going into the gas chambers,’ and maintained that ‘the camera stops at the gas chamber, only entering after the extermination.’<sup>xlvii</sup> Eschewing any attempt to represent Auschwitz or the Sonderkommando as a whole, Nemes and his team maintain that their approach is distinctive because it seeks to totally ‘immerse’

the viewer in the experience of a single fictional individual,<sup>xlviii</sup> but only over a brief 36-hour period. The camera literally follows in Saul's footsteps: we frequently see his back or look over his shoulder, the intention being to convince viewers that they see and hear what Saul does. The rationale for this is twofold. First the camera seeks to replicate Saul's eye-line and field of vision, with what is outside or on the periphery of this deliberately out of focus. Second, this strategy seeks to communicate Saul's mindset to the viewer. A constant refrain in *Sonderkommando* testimony is that it was only possible to function in such an environment by becoming desensitized and like 'a robot.' According to Nemes, after four months in the *Sonderkommando*, Saul had 'lost his ability to see the horror, no longer noticing the horror because he got used to it.'<sup>xlix</sup>

Additionally, Nemes highlights his film's deliberate refusal to explain 'where we are and what is going on.'<sup>1</sup> Historical events, such as the buried texts, the SK photographs, the uprising, mass escape and possible massacre of members of the *Sonderkommando* at a barn near Rajsko, are alluded to, but there is no attempt to contextualize or elaborate (e.g., by using establishing shots or historical titles, or providing explanatory dialogue, as Spielberg does in *Schindler's List*). Rather, Nemes intends to destabilize the viewer in an attempt to communicate, in some small way, the confusion and disorientation experienced by many new arrivals at the camp.

*Son of Saul* is rooted in the premise that the *Sonderkommando* were, in effect, 'already "dead."' There is no hope. There is no rescue,<sup>li</sup> and can be read as a fascinating, provocative exploration of what 'choice,' resistance and heroism might mean in such a context. The narrative revolves around Saul's quest, an increasingly desperate, obsessive search for a rabbi to say Kaddish and ensure the correct burial, of the body he has effectively stolen of a boy who may – or may not – be his (illegitimate) son. Is this obsessive quest an act of resistance, and/or of self-sacrifice? A quest for redemption? An act of extreme selfishness and/or delusion? Or some combination

of these? According to Röhrig Saul's quest is 'one level higher,' as an act of resistance, than the more 'political' plans for an uprising and/or mass escape that preoccupy fellow members of the Sonderkommando.<sup>lii</sup> Nemes' position is less clear-cut, contrasting physical and 'inner' survival. In accepting the Academy Award, he suggested that Saul's quest demonstrates that 'even in the darkest hours there might be a voice within us that allows us to remain human.'<sup>liii</sup> The film itself is careful to portray a range of conflicting perspectives. Fellow Sonderkommando criticise Saul for being selfish, deluded, even mad, arguing that his obsession has resulted in the deaths of others and compromised key aspects of the preparations for the uprising, e.g., the loss of explosives, with Abraham accusing Saul of failing the living because of his obsession with the dead boy, baldly stating, 'We'll die because of you.' Saul is unrepentant, countering 'we are already dead,' suggesting that their plans for an uprising or mass escape are as 'senseless' or pointless as Abraham considers his quest to be. On more than one occasion, a rabbi attempts to explain to Saul that the presence of a rabbi is not required to say Kaddish nor ensure a correct burial for the boy. Saul pays no heed. His quest ends in apparent failure, as the boy's body slips from his grasp as he struggles to cross a river during the mass escape attempt from the camp during the uprising, and disappears downstream, and off screen. Yet Saul's enigmatic half-smile when he sees – or imagines – a boy in the doorway of a building (an illusion to the barn in Rajsko?) where a handful of surviving Sonderkommando have taken refuge, a boy clearly different from the boy whose body he so desperately sought to bury, and who, if he is not a figment of Saul's imagination, may have betrayed the men's hiding place to the SS, suggests he has found some kind of peace or closure and that, in such an extreme context, such small gestures or assertions of humanity, of self, constitute something, a form of resistance, and that for Saul at least that something is enough.

Whilst acknowledging *Son of Saul*'s many qualities, there is an implicit tension, even possible contradiction, between Nemes' repeated insistence that the 'heart of hell' and what lies beyond

the threshold of the gas chamber cannot be imagined or re-created, whilst simultaneously maintaining that it is possible, indeed essential, to recreate at least a semblance of that reality so that viewers become fully 'immersed' so that they viscerally experience what his fictional protagonist sees and hears. This is a relentless film that assaults viewers' senses visually, and even more so aurally, with explicit images and sounds (so much so, that Nick James observed that 'one of the most terrifying radio dramas I have ever listened to is the soundtrack of off-screen events in László Nemes's film *Son of Saul*. It's a maelstrom of screamed orders, clanking machinery grinding motors, brutal beatings and random shootings that hardly ever dies down.'<sup>liv</sup>) Some of the more negative critics went so far as to compare Nemes' approach to a computer game in which the player becomes the protagonist, travelling through layers of experience.

Despite Nemes' extensive research, what his viewers see and experience is very different to Olère's 'immersion' in his experiences as a survivor of the Sonderkommando. His sketches and paintings both document and seek to give some meaning to, even perhaps partly exorcise or work through, his memories. I believe that *Son of Saul* is most effective as a representation precisely because of its refusal to compromise its vision by making life easier for viewers by supplying them with explanations of the context and historical background, information that would not have been available to the majority of new arrivals, or even to those working within the camp. In addition, it offers a compelling representation of the diversity of the Sonderkommando in terms of nationality, political and religious attitudes, and their responses to their circumstances and what resistance might mean in such a context. The Sonderkommando are not depicted as a homogenous, united and heroic group, but rather as disparate individuals and subgroups, riven with tensions. The film powerfully communicates this diversity by employing a babble of languages (with much of the background chatter deliberately not translated via subtitles), and its portrayal of the often almost utter

incomprehension between characters of what the other is trying to say or do. Although the film focuses almost exclusively on Saul and his quest, this central character nevertheless remains opaque, inscrutable and something of a blank canvas, inviting a diversity of interpretations of, and responses to, his quest, both within the film itself, and in the critical discussion it continues to provoke.

Nemes and Röhrig both spoke of their sense of awe when meeting Dario Gabbai, then aged 93 and one of the few Sonderkommando still alive when the film was released. This meeting took place in Los Angeles following a private screening for Gabbai of the film. He was quoted as broadly endorsing the film: 'the movie is pretty accurate.... The sounds emanating from the gas chamber mostly rang true,' with the qualification that 'nothing you can see on film can ever be 100 percent.'<sup>lv</sup> In recalling the meeting, Nemes insisted that he had read and been inspired by the testimonies of the Sonderkommando, (both those buried near the crematoria in 1944 and subsequently recovered, and those of survivors) when researching, writing and making the film. Yet he was also careful to emphasise the gulf separating such testimonies and his own attempt to 'immerse' viewers in the realities they bore witness to, observing, 'Dario will never be able to fully communicate what he went through... In a way he remains the bearer of a secret and that's tragic. I made this film to at least try to transmit, in a visceral way, this experience. But it's only a faint attempt.'<sup>lvi</sup> Nemes' 'faint attempt' has indisputably played an important role, particularly in terms of the debate it prompted and in generating increased awareness of the Sonderkommando, partly as a result of the media attention the film attracted.

However, to ensure that such increased interest can effectively be catered for, it is essential that there is public access to reliable information about the Sonderkommando, particularly in terms of testimony by the Sonderkommando themselves, in a variety of forms. There are now a growing number of published memoirs by surviving members of the Sonderkommando, such



as Filip Muller (who also features prominently in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*), Henryk Mandelbaum and Shlomo Venezia (who feature in documentaries such as *Slaves of the Death Camps* [Channel 5, 1999] and *Sonderkommando: The Living Dead of Auschwitz* [Yesterday, 2012]). Testimonies by the Sonderkommando are also increasingly disseminated in educational resources produced by organisations such as the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Shoah Visual History Foundation. Yet, it is less easy to access crucial sources such as the buried texts which, whilst available in an increasing range of languages (e.g., Polish, German, French, Italian and Spanish) have long been out of print in English, as are the two published collections of Olere's work. As noted above, there is evidence that this situation is also starting to change, with the inclusion of Olere's art in more recent Holocaust exhibitions and documentaries, and the publication in 2018 by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum of an English translation of Gradowski's manuscripts. The Museum's temporary exhibition of Olere's work has the potential to further increase public awareness of his art, and of the historical significance of the Sonderkommando as witnesses. To see Olère's art **in** Auschwitz, close to the sites he depicts, has the potential to be a very powerful, challenging, and disturbing, experience. However, there were over two million visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in 2017, and numbers have been steadily increasing during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The pressure of such visitor numbers means that visits to Auschwitz I, particularly the majority of group visits, are time-limited, with inevitable constraints on what it is possible to do and see in the time available. In Auschwitz I, the majority of such groups participate a tour that focuses on the permanent exhibition, the Wall of Death and the reconstructed Crematorium I, and therefore will have little or no opportunity to visit a temporary exhibition such as that on Olère. The publication of a catalogue to accompany the temporary exhibition, particularly if it is on sale in multiple languages via the Museum's website, would partly address the issue of accessibility, and enable those interested but unable to visit the Museum during the months when the Olère exhibition is on

display to benefit, at least to some degree, from it. The Museum's acquisition of a substantial number of Olere's artwork also increases the likelihood that at least some (those deemed age-appropriate for school age visitors) will be incorporated into the new permanent exhibition currently being created, thus enabling his 'visual memoir' to scream its truth out to all of those visiting the site.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation* and Fogu, Kansteiner and Presner (eds.), *Probing the Limits of Holocaust Culture*.

<sup>ii</sup> Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*, 84

<sup>iii</sup> Crane, 'Choosing not to look,' 309-330.

<sup>iv</sup> Engelking and Leociak, 'Holocaust, 1939-1945,' 345.

<sup>v</sup> Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare*, 469.

<sup>vi</sup> The term the 'heart of hell' was coined by Zalmen Gradowski, one of the leaders of the Sonderkommando uprising and author of a number of texts discovered near Crematorium III in 1945. His recovered writings have been translated into English as *From the Heart of Hell*.

<sup>vii</sup> Greif, 'Seventy years after,' 141. Robert Jan van Pelt expresses similar sentiments in arguing that the testimonies of the Sonderkommando represent the 'symbolic centre' of Auschwitz because 'only they directly witnessed the fate of the hundreds of thousands who were murdered immediately after arrival.' Van Pelt, 'Auschwitz and the memory of the Holocaust,' 321.

<sup>viii</sup> Levi, 'Shame' in *The Drowned and the Saved*, 2457-2471, 2468.

<sup>ix</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 85.

<sup>x</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 211.

<sup>xi</sup> Mandelbaum in Bartosik and Willma, *I Was at the Auschwitz Crematorium*, 89

<sup>xii</sup> Piotr M.A. Cywiński, 'Introduction', Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, *Report 2012*, 5

<sup>xiii</sup> 'Scream the truth at the world' is a phrase taken from the last will and testament of Dawid Graber, one of the team of three tasked with burying the first section of the Oyneg Shabes archive. Graber's last will and testament features prominently in the Warsaw ghetto section of the permanent exhibition of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and also provides the title for the new permanent exhibition on Oyneg Shabes at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, *What we were unable to shout out to the world*. Emanuel Ringelblum, members of Oyneg Shabes and the Sonderkommando authors of the 'buried texts' shared a conviction that they were engaged in a war over memory, over whether the history of the destruction of the Jews in the Holocaust would be record and, if so, from whose perspective.

<sup>xiv</sup> Scholars estimate that c2000 men, primarily but not exclusively Jews, served in the Sonderkommando, of whom circa 100 were alive at the time of the evacuation of KL Auschwitz and the death marches, and c80+ survived the war. Only a small number of buried texts have been recovered from the grounds of the crematoria. See, for example, Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*; Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 7.

<sup>xv</sup> Wiesel, *One Generation After*, 39

<sup>xvi</sup> Applebaum 'The Shoah film they didn't show'. A similar point is made by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum who state that the history of the Sonderkommando 'belongs without any doubt to the darkest chapters of the history of the Auschwitz camp', News: '70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sonderkommando revolt'.

<sup>xvii</sup> Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 41

<sup>xviii</sup> Bartov, *The 'Jew' in Cinema*, 145.

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<sup>xix</sup> See, for example, Shoard, 'Son of Saul's astonishing recreation of Auschwitz renews Holocaust debate.'

<sup>xx</sup> See, for example, Mandelbaum in Rees, *The Holocaust*, 324; Dario Gabbai in Rees, *The Holocaust*, 329.

<sup>xxi</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 2441.

<sup>xxii</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 2443

<sup>xxiii</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 2447

<sup>xxiv</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 2449.

<sup>xxv</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 2448.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 10

<sup>xxvii</sup> Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare*: 466

<sup>xxviii</sup> Feinstein, 'Art after Auschwitz,' 156.

<sup>xxix</sup> Klarsfeld, *Hunting the Truth*, 430. For Piotr Cywiński, director of the ABSM, Olère's artworks are 'completely unique as documents illustrating the history of the extermination,' whilst Piotr Setkiewicz stresses their 'unique value to researchers.' Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 'News: 18 paintings by former Sonderkommando prisoner David Olère enriched the collections of the Auschwitz memorial.'

<sup>xxx</sup> For example, there is only brief reference to Olère in both Gideon Greif's extended opening chapter in *We Wept Without Tears* discussing the history of the Sonderkommando, the texts they produced, the scholarly discussion of them, and their representation, extensive discussion of the history and represent, and in Chare and Williams' extended analysis of the Sonderkommando, the buried texts and the Sonderkommando photographs in *Matters of Testimony*.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Klarsfeld, *The eyes of a Witness, David Olère (1902-1985)*, 9; in their memoir *Hunting the Truth*, the Klarsfelds note that 'Olère's work is hard to look at' (430).

<sup>xxxii</sup> Beit Lohamei Hagetaot, 'Featured artist: David Olère.'

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Olère frequently signed and dated his art, but the titles given to the can vary. This is the title given to the painting in Greif and Siebers, *Death Factory Auschwitz*: 234. In the collection *Witness: Images of Auschwitz*, titles and text are provided by Olère's son Alexandre, and the painting is entitled 'Asphyxiation in the Gas Chamber,' 26.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See the publication that accompanied this exhibition, Greif and Siebers, *Death Factory Auschwitz*. See 'David Olère', p. 314. Olère's art features on pp. 234-235, 260-266 and 276-277.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 'News: Unique exhibition 'David Olère. The one who survived Crematorium III' from 30 October at the Auschwitz Memorial  
18 paintings by former Sonderkommando prisoner David Olère enriched the Collections of the Auschwitz Memorial.'

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Beit Lohamei Hagetaot, 'Featured artist: David Olère.'

<sup>xxxvii</sup> For example *Sonderkommando: The Living Dead of Auschwitz* (Yesterday, 2012) which is a feature length interview with Henryk Mandelbaum,

<sup>xxxviii</sup> van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 173; Gray, *The Irving Judgment*, 7.23-7.27, 13.77: 171-172, 318.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Smith, 'Sins of omission,' 62

<sup>xl</sup> See Romney, 'Dead man walking' and Grossmann, Atrocity exhibitionism.'

<sup>xli</sup> Gideon Greif interview, *Objectiv a fiókból*.

<sup>lii</sup> Lanzmann in Donadio, 'In *Son of Saul*, Laszlo Nemes expands the language of Holocaust films.'

<sup>liiii</sup> Lanzmann in Cronk, "'Shoah' filmmaker Claude Lanzmann talks Spielberg, *Son of Saul*.'

<sup>liv</sup> See Greif interview, *Objectiv a fiókból* and Röhrig quoted in Shoard, 'Son of Saul's astonishing recreation of Auschwitz renews Holocaust debate', and in Dan Kugan-Kans, 'That Holocaust feeling,' *Mosaic magazine*, 7 March 2016.

<sup>lv</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 56-57.

<sup>lvi</sup> Quoted in Rees: *A New History*: 329. See also Dov Paiskovic quoted in Darlow, 'Baggage and responsibility: *The World at War* and the Holocaust,' 145.

<sup>lvii</sup> Nemes in Ganjavie, 'The reality of death: An interview with László Nemes about *Son of Saul*.'

<sup>lviii</sup> See, for example, Nemes in Murphy, 'László Nemes narrates a scene from *Son of Saul*,' and Klug, 'In devastating *Son of Saul*, Jewish director goes where few others dare.'

<sup>lix</sup> Nemes in Ganjavie, 'The reality of death: An interview with László Nemes about *Son of Saul*.'

<sup>1</sup> Nemes in Ganjavie, 'The reality of death: An interview with László Nemes about *Son of Saul*.'

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<sup>li</sup> Nemes interviewed in Andrew, ‘*Son of Saul* – Framing the unspeakable.’

<sup>lii</sup> Röhrig in ‘*Son of Saul* brings viewers to the heart of the Nazi death machine at Auschwitz.’

<sup>liii</sup> Nemes quoted in Kemp, ‘Film of the Week: *Son of Saul*.’

<sup>liv</sup> James, ‘Son of Saul – first look.’

<sup>lv</sup> Pfefferman, ‘*Son of Saul* and the mitzvah of surviving the unimaginable.’

<sup>lvi</sup> Nemes quoted in Pfefferman, ‘*Son of Saul* and the mitzvah of surviving the unimaginable.’

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# **Translation and the Language of Testimony: Filip Müller's Testimony at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial**

## **Abstract:**

This paper examines the interaction between the Auschwitz survivor Filip Müller, the interpreter Otto Stegmann, and the Presiding Judge Hans Hofmeyer during Müller's cross-examination during the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial. A close reading of testimony, made possible by the audio recordings, allows us to show how Müller's decision to speak German, as opposed to his native Slovak or Czech, led to an interesting dynamic between the participants: Müller's testimony arises out of their interaction and the moments of conflict and collaboration that characterized it. In particular, this essay explores the role of the interpreter in enabling Müller to make his testimony, and shows how translation processes help to shape the way that the testimony is formulated.

**Keywords:** Translation; interpreting; Auschwitz; testimony; *Sonderkommando*; trial testimony; German language; Czech language

The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials (1963–65) have attracted significant interest in the last decade or so, both in scholarship and in the German media: in particular, two well-received films have generated public interest (*Im Labyrinth des Schweigens* (*Labyrinth of Lies*), dir. Giulio Ricciarelli, 2014, and *Der Staat gegen Fritz Bauer* (*The People vs. Fritz Bauer*), dir. Lars Kraume, 2015). Work by historians and scholars of Critical Legal Studies has assessed the trials in terms of their significance for the jurisprudence of genocide or for the social and political context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the 1960s.<sup>i</sup> Less detailed attention has been paid to the witness statements themselves, though there has been work evaluating them as historical evidence, as well as interview projects with the surviving witnesses.<sup>ii</sup>

The Frankfurt witnesses were in a very difficult situation: many of them had never been to Germany, except perhaps on one of the death marches in the final months of the war or as a displaced person. For many, Germany was still hostile territory, and, at least initially, there was little or no support available for the witnesses when they arrived, including translation services: voluntary associations took on this role, for example the Sh'erit ha-Pletah group and volunteers led by Emmi Bonhoeffer. Even before they arrived, witnesses from Eastern Bloc countries had often gone through an elaborate process of briefing and political pressure from the authorities at home.

The proceedings themselves could be an emotional ordeal for the witnesses: even questions about family or personal details could evoke memories of family members who had been murdered. The institutional and linguistic rituals of the trial, which aimed at neutrality and objectivity, could have unexpected effects on the witnesses: for example, a simple question about the witness's family circumstances could bring up agonizing memories of family members who had been murdered. The requirements of court testimony often clashed with the way in which the witnesses told their stories, and the need to produce verifiable evidence

clashed with the need of the witnesses to bear witness to their own suffering, and pay tribute to the dead. This could produce a situation of tension and mistrust, made more intense by the fact that the witnesses were standing in the courtroom under the eyes of the accused.

Translation was a problem in the court, as it was hard to find specialist translators available for the many languages spoken by the witnesses. The translators themselves worked in different ways; there appears to have been no agreed standard on the perspective that the translator should take up, for example, whether to use the first or third person when translating a witness's words. Some appear to feel it is their job to support the witness, while others are concerned to take up an 'objective', professional distance.

There would be important questions to ask about the work of the interpreters in terms of their accuracy and professionalism, but in this case, I am interested in how processes of translation will often structure the situation that makes testimony possible, how the interpreters support the witnesses, and how they contribute directly to the formulation of the testimony. So, rather than automatically assuming that translation is a problem or a barrier, it is useful to show how it enables the testimony; making translation visible is therefore not about separating out the 'pure' testimony from the translation, but is instead a way of helping us understand how a testimony emerges in a specific context.

These general points will be illustrated by looking at the Frankfurt testimony of the Slovak Jewish Auschwitz survivor Filip Müller and the interaction between Müller, the interpreter Otto Stegmann, and the Presiding Judge Hans Hofmeyer. Born in 1922, Müller was deported to Auschwitz in April 1942. He was selected to work for the *Sonderkommando*, that is the group of Jewish prisoners who were forced to dispose of the bodies and possessions of those who were murdered in the gas chambers. Though most of the *Sonderkommando* members were themselves killed after a short time, being replaced by others, Müller survived through a

combination of luck, manipulation and political solidarity with members of the Czechoslovak resistance in the camp. His testimony is thus unique – he may be the only prisoner to survive three years of work in the *Sonderkommandos* both of the Auschwitz main camp and the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex.

Müller gave testimony to trials in Czechoslovakia shortly after liberation, and collaborated on a testimony in Czech with other survivors and resisters. He was called to Frankfurt in 1964 to give evidence to the trial of 22 former Auschwitz guards, some of whom he had known well; during his testimony, he described his own experiences, paid tribute to other prisoners, and provided evidence for the sadistic behavior of the defendants. His unique testimony played a key role in the conviction of former SS officers who had organized the operation of the gas chambers and committed many other acts of sadistic murder.

He emigrated to West Germany in 1969, after the Prague Spring, and continued to speak and write about his experiences for a number of years, before withdrawing from public life in the 1980s. At various key moments in his life, translation played a decisive and defining role in the way he performed the role of witness in public, but this paper will concentrate on the one that has attracted the least attention, namely certain details of the interaction between the witness, the judge and the translator during Müller's testimony to the Frankfurt trial.<sup>iii</sup>

My intention is to try reading this testimony in terms of translation, by bringing questions of translation to the foreground. In doing so, I want to look at how the translator contributes through a few interventions to the situation in which the testimony is given, and to think about what this means for the testimony itself. Is it possible to think about this testimony in terms beyond its value as evidence in a trial or as historical documentation?

If we look at it carefully, we can see this kind of trial testimony as a specific form of collaborative performance, with the testimony produced in the interaction of the agents

involved in this specific situation – with its ritualistic structure, its rules and particular language, and with its inbuilt power imbalances. Witnesses act within a shifting network of relationships and temporary alliances within the highly structured dialogues of the witness examination, and have a certain amount of space for strategies that conform to their own interests.<sup>iv</sup>

But there is still a tendency amongst scholars working on Holocaust testimony to downplay the value of trial testimony as a source of knowledge beyond its evidential value in the terms set by the legal system – trial witnesses are seen by scholars of testimony and memory, such as Aleida Assmann as passive, caught in a ritualistic process of question and answer that allows them no agency and may simply reproduce their victimhood.<sup>v</sup> For this reason, the knowledge to be gained from their statements is of limited value, as it conforms only to the specific needs of the court. There is some truth in this – the interests of the court and the interests of the witness in describing his/her own experiences may be very different – but it is not the whole story.

The witness's intentions may coincide with or clash with the intentions of other actors, over a long period or a brief episode. The key issue here is that witnesses are caught between the different conceptions of the purpose of the trial: they have an investment in seeing justice done, and this will affect how they present their testimony in terms of direct eyewitness observation, immediate personal experience, and precise statements about time or place, but they may well also share the intention to educate the German public about the nature of the camp, the attitudes of the perpetrators, and the effects of their own experiences. Additionally, they may wish to shift the focus onto the victims or to pay tribute to particular individuals.

Witnesses employ many different strategies to negotiate their path through the questioning and within the network of conflicting expectations they are confronted with, and they encounter the

strategies of the professional jurists involved in the investigation, prosecution and defense. We might name compliance vs resistance, concealment vs directness, obfuscation or complication vs. simplification, distraction or strategic feints and switches of direction, flattery, intimidation, attempts to impress or please. Witnesses switch between general observations and personal narratives, precise descriptions of visual impressions or events and accounts of emotional states – but the specific demands of the situation, namely to provide concrete eyewitness evidence and to connect specific individuals with specific actions, establishes a basic structure for the witness's narratives.

Reading – and in particular listening – closely to the witness statements allows us to follow the interactions between the various participants at a level of detail that would not otherwise be possible, and to trace their constantly shifting relationships in terms of power hierarchies, consent, conflict, agreement, resistance, cooperation, temporary alliances, and many other processes. My aim here is to show that the interpreters are active participants in these complex, dynamic relationships, and that paying close attention to their work can give us a more detailed insight into how the witness testimonies emerged.

In terms of the work of translators and interpreters in this context, one could consider questions of cultural appropriation, interpretation or distortion that might arise when thinking about this situation, or consider the perspective of the translator and the ethical issues that arise from the situation. But instead, I will consider translation as a form of re-narration. The first person narratives of personal testimony – at its simplest, telling the story of something that happened to me yesterday – act as a catalyst for the production of a first person narrative in the listener: a hypothetical narrative in which the listener follows the events described, imagines it happening to him/her self, or positions self in relation to the events.

This makes first person narrative testimony a very powerful tool in social interactions and for generating and passing on knowledge: as a listener, I position myself in relation to the story being told, visualize it and generate my own potential narratives, which say as much about me and my attitudes as they do about the teller of the story.<sup>vi</sup> Applying this to translation, an individual translating a first person testimony narrative - or contributing to its formulation through translation – is likely to be developing their own subjective narrative in the process. The translator does not simply translate the words, but visualizes the situation in all its violence and horror, an internal narrative that influences the translation performance, and which is affected by the translator's own feelings and interpretation of what is being described.

Müller himself is for the most part confident and composed, even where he struggles with the language. He has a clear sense of what he wants to achieve, and is willing to describe in minute detail the topography of his surroundings and the character and actions of the perpetrators in order to provide verifiable testimony. He shapes the narrative clearly in response to questioning, interrupting the proceedings and returning to points if he wants to clarify something. There are moments in which the emotional stress becomes overwhelming, however, an aspect of his testimony that is picked up and commented on by the judges in their final verdict.

I will concentrate here on a specific aspect of Müller's long testimony, namely the interaction between witness, judge and translator. On the first day of his appearance, 5 October 1964, he spoke in German, asking for occasional support from the translator Otto Stegmann; it is clear that after a number of hours, this is becoming harder to sustain, and he reverts to Czech more often. On the second day, 8 October, he spoke in Czech in more formal style, with the translator Erwin Jarolim providing consecutive translation. He is always able to understand the questioning of the Presiding Judge Hans Hofmeyer and the defense and prosecution councils.

A small number of examples will be examined that show how the testimonial narrative emerges out of a collaboration between witness, translator and investigating judge, and how this narration interacts with the evidential narrative that emerges through the judge's questioning, including moments in which the judge tries his own hand at translation.

The documents used here are the written transcripts of the audio recordings of the cross-examinations, which have been made freely available online by the Fritz-Bauer-Institut.<sup>vii</sup> I have on occasion adjusted the transcript in the light of repeated listening to the audio, with the aim of giving the reader a more immediate impression of Müller's speaking voice, including his problems with German syntax and vocabulary. For each citation, I have given the page number in the transcript and the time on the audio recording, to make it easier to locate these exchanges within Müller's long testimony. I have kept the punctuation marks of the original transcript: "... " marks an interruption or overlapping speech, and [ ] marks clarification of incorrect vocabulary or an editorial insertion. My English translations are designed to clarify what is happening and illustrate the points made in my argument. For this reason, where Müller's choice of vocabulary is incorrect – for example, when he addresses the judge as 'Rechtsanwalt' (lawyer) – but it has no material bearing on the argument, I have corrected in translation ("Your Honor") in order to avoid confusion.

These extracts are taken from the first day of Müller's testimony, in which he speaks German, with the support of Stegmann, as this enables us to explore how translation is woven into the collaborative process by which the testimony is produced. After the witness and translator are sworn in, Müller begins by stating that he wishes to speak German:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Herr Rechtsanwalt, ich werde probieren...

Vorsitzender Richter:



Deutsch zu sprechen.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Deutsch zu sprechen. Und vielleicht, wenn ich mich nicht gut ausdrücke, daß der Herr Dolmetscher soll mir...

Vorsitzender Richter:

Ja.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Dann ist es vielleicht besser. (p. 1, 1')

(Müller: Your Honor, I will try.... / Judge: To speak German. / Müller: To speak German. And maybe, if I don't express myself well, the interpreter should... / Judge: Yes. / Müller: Then it's perhaps better.)

One should not underestimate the courage that it takes to do this: it means interrupting the judge in a German courtroom, where Müller is the only non-native speaker of German, and where the proceedings are conducted in the language associated with the perpetrators who are lined up watching and listening. The intention is clear, though: to speak directly to German speakers in the courtroom and beyond, rather than just fulfilling the requirements of a witness statement. So Müller clearly sees translation as a potential barrier to speaking directly to the audience in and beyond the court.

Judge Hofmeyer's interruption shows that this is not something unexpected: many witnesses made the same choice, and it is clear that the court supports it. It also shows, however, a feature of Hofmeyer's questioning: the occasional anticipation of answers and completion of sentences, even when it means anticipating the translator and producing his own (false)

translation from Czech. What seems like a minor issue demonstrates that the participants in these exchanges are all developing their own narratives of the events through translation.

For the most part, the translator's job here is to help to build up an exact picture of events, the topography of the camp, and the appearance of the perpetrators, in order to help identify them. Stegmann is not being asked to interpret for Müller, and is never in a position in which he has to decide what perspective to take up, for example, whether to use the first or third person when translating another's words. There are, however, one or two occasions when he adds detail to the picture. For example, when Müller is describing the appearance of the victims on opening the gas chamber:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Sagen wir, da haben wir gesehen ein Kind, das ist an der Brust, die Mutter hat — pěnu.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Schaum.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

So Schaum

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Schaum vor dem Mund. (p. 8, 14')

(Müller: Let's say, we saw a child, it's at the breast, the mother has – pěnu. / Interpreter: Foam. / Müller: Sort of foam. / Interpreter [interrupts]: Foam at the mouth.)

Here, it is clear that Stegmann is filling in the picture himself. Small details like this make it clear that it is not only Müller who has images of the camp in his head, but that the other participants are visualizing the situations described here before their mind's eye and constructing parallel narratives. This leaves us with the disturbing idea that translation in a

situation like this involves not only finding linguistic equivalents, but also creating one's own images and narratives in parallel and assessing them for their usefulness or appropriateness: for the most part, this is not visible as it is a cognitive process, but there are moments when it becomes clear.

If we look closely at the role of the judge in these exchanges, bearing this idea in mind, we find that he is operating according to the same principle. Of course, his task is to lead an investigation through critical questioning, and the construction and critical assessment of narratives that accord with the rules of evidence and the formulation of guilt and innocence. However, I am here deliberately not reading these texts in terms of jurisprudence and judicial procedure, but rather as a form of witnessing, which, if not exactly collaborative, arises out of a specific situation of ritualistic questioning

If we consider the relationships between the participants in this process in translational terms, we can observe how judge Hofmeyer engages in the same process of parallel visualization and narrative construction. He does this in various ways. On occasion it is a matter of small 'corrections', replacing a word with one that appears to be more appropriate to the situation, or intervening to confirm information from previous knowledge, even though Müller is trying to present a more subjective view, giving the prisoner's language and perspective:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Und dort war das große »Sonderkommando« Birkenau, das schon gearbeitet hat in den großen – wie man es genannt

Vorsitzender Richter [unterbricht]:

Krematorien.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

»Fabriken des Krematoriums« (p. 26, 68')

(Müller: And the large Birkenau *Sonderkommando* was there, who were already working in the large – as they were called / Judge [interrupts]: Crematoria. / Müller: “Crematorium factories.”)

It is often clear that the judge is creating his own interpretation of what Müller describes; in the following example, he has his own view of the psychology of inmates who cannot find the motivation to participate in the revolt:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Aber es waren da solche Häftlinge, die so...

Vorsitzender Richter:

Ängstlich.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Verzweifelt.

Vorsitzender Richter:

Verängstigt. (p. 42, 99')

(Müller: But there was also that kind of prisoner, who were so... / Judge: Fearful. /

Müller: Despairing. / Judge: Frightened.)

This is a significant difference, with judge Hofmeyer thinking in terms that he is able to understand, or perhaps imagining how he would feel in this situation and *believing* that he is assisting in a translation problem.

There are moments when judge and witness appear to be creating a narrative together, when the insistent ritual of question and answer seems to become something else, as in this sequence where Müller describes having to pull bodies from a pit filled with water:

Zeuge Filip Müller

Wir müssen alle die Leichen ziehen.

Vorsitzender Richter:

Herausziehen.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Aus dem Wasser auf einen...

Vorsitzender Richter:

Haufen.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Haufen geben. Und wir konnten nicht, weil die Leichen schon voll Wasser waren. Und als wir sie nahmen, da...

Vorsitzender Richter:

Glitschte man ab.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Fließt es, ja, und wir fallen in das Wasser. (pp. 13–14, 30')

(Müller: We have to pull the corpses. / Judge: Pull them out. / Müller: Out of the water onto a... / Judge: Pile. / Müller: Put them on a pile. And we couldn't because the corpses were already full of water. And when we picked them up... / Judge: You slipped. / Müller: It runs, yes, and we fall into the water.)

These moments stand out, as Hofmeyer for the most part allows Müller to speak freely, interrupted only by questions for clarification. But in exchanges like the this, it becomes clear that the judge has his own images and narrative in mind, put together from what this witness is saying and his own previous knowledge. We also gain some insight into the judge's emotional response to the story, in his choice of words and the insistent nature of his interruptions. At moments like this, the two narratives come together, in a striking but potentially problematic way.

Where translation is necessary, Stegmann participates in this ritualistic act of witness, as in a sequence where Müller describes listening to the cries of those inside the gas chamber:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Und da hören wir auf einmal schweren — kašel.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Husten.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Einen Husten. Und sie schreien, die Menschen. Man hört die Kinder, und alles zusammen schreit. — Bouchají na dveře

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Sie schlagen an die Tür.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Jako z dálky je to slyšet.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Wie aus der Ferne ist das zu hören.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Zu hören, wie sie an die Tür schlagen. Dann langsam, wieder Schlagen und nicht mehr, langsamer, langsamer, langsamer, noch [hustet] so.

Vorsitzender Richter:

Ein Husten, und dann

Zeuge Filip Müller [unterbricht]:

Ein Husten.

Vorsitzender Richter:

Verstummte das Geschrei. (p. 18, 44')

(Müller: And then we suddenly hear loud – kašel. / Interpreter: Coughing. / Müller: Coughing. And they cry out, the people. You can hear the children, and they are all crying together. – Bouchají na dveře / Interpreter: They bang at the door. / Müller: Jako z dálky je to slyšet. / Interpreter: You can hear it as if in the distance. / Müller: Hear them banging at the door. Then slowly, more banging and no longer, slowly, slowly, slowly, again [coughs] like this. / Judge: Coughing, and then / Müller [interrupts]: Coughing. / Judge: The crying went silent.)

I would argue that this is a unique and significant mode of witnessing, not necessarily because it produces new facts, but because it exposes certain things about all forms of witnessing that are otherwise hidden: the collaborative nature of the act of witnessing, the way that the enabling context structures the witness narrative, how different interests may be at work in the production of the final text, and how the witness may have to make compromises under pressure in order to tell the story in a way that fits the context and satisfies the other interests. Above all, we are able to see processes of translation at work in a concrete context and

understand the extent of their contribution without resorting to simplistic theories of ‘loss’ or ‘distortion.’

If we look closely at the translation relationships in this transcript, we find that there are moments when the narratives being constructed clash with each other. Judge Hofmeyer attempts his own translations in a way that shows the development of his own inner narrative and the way in which he visualizes the events:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Dort waren wir in dieser Nacht, dieser schrecklichen Nacht. Wir waren so schon, ich möchte sagen — duševně a fyzicky zničení.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Seelisch und...

Vorsitzender Richter:

Zusammengebrochen.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Ja [unverständlich] vernichtet.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Und gebrochen, daß wir dort auf der Erde wie die Tiere schliefen. (pp. 14–15, 30')

(Müller: There we were in this night, this terrible night. We were already, I'd like to say – duševně a fyzicky zničení. / Interpreter: Mentally and... / Judge: Collapsed. / Interpreter: Yes [unclear] annihilated. / Müller: And collapsed, that we slept on the earth like animals.)



These are small examples, but they show Hofmeyer making assumptions and trying to lead the construction of the narrative. They also demonstrate the pressure on Müller: he is on occasion able to correct the judge, but at other times accepts Hofmeyer's interpretation, even if the word 'vernichtet' seems to belong more fully to the 'world' of the camp and the language of the Holocaust.

I will look at one final example of tendentious translation, which has real consequences for the formulation of the verdict against Hans Stark, the SS officer who oversaw the *Sonderkommandos* for a while. Here, Müller is discussing Stark's habit of taking prisoners out of the group being led to the gas chamber and shooting them individually:

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Schauen Sie, Herr Rechtsanwalt, ich möchte auch nur paar, ich möchte nicht – aber ich sollte Ihnen zeigen, was Stark war. Sagen wir, es kommt Transport. Viele Male nimmt er sich jüdische Frauen, acht, zehn, fünf [unverständlich]: »Sarah, zu die Wand!« Die gehen alle ins Gas. Jetzt nimmt er zwei Frauen, aber vorher geht er in die Politische Abteilung und bringt eine — pušku.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Ein Gewehr.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Ein Gewehr. Aber das Gewehr hört man nicht, da war nur: »tschck«.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Ein lautloses.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Und er packte es immer, und herauf lief so eine kleine Patrone mit Z, eine kleine rote

Patrone. Und er stellt sich die zwei Frauen – das war nach dem Vergasen, aber nicht einmal, viele Male –, da stellt er sich die Frauen, und die Frauen sehen, daß er auf sie [+ zielt]. Die Frau — si klekla.

Vorsitzender Richter:

Sie zittert.

Dolmetscher Stegmann:

Sie kniete.

Zeuge Filip Müller:

Sie kniet. Und sie sagt, weil sie nicht weiß, was Stark ist: »Herr Kommandant, ich bitte Sie, lassen Sie mich leben. Ich habe doch nichts gemacht.« Und: »Los, Sarah, stehen! Sarah stehen! Sarah stehen! Los, mußt du stehen!« Er spricht ja so. So spricht er. Er schießt erst mal hier oder hier, dann wieder in die Füße. Die fünf, sagen wir, müssen zuschauen, die anderen. Das kann man nicht schildern. Und da erschießt er sie alle. Ich will nicht noch so eine Gedächtnis, eine schrecklichere. Ich sage so: Ich sehe mein ganzes Leben Stark. Mein ganzes Leben. Wo ich gehe, sehe ich ihn. Furchtbar.

(pp. 21–22, 55')

(Müller: Look, Your Honor, I would like just to, I don't want to – but I should show you, what Stark was. Let's say, a transport arrives. Many times he takes aside Jewish women, eight, ten, five [unclear]: "Sarah! To the wall!" They all go to the gas. Now he takes two women, but first he goes into the Political Department and brings a – pušku. / Interpreter: A gun. / Müller: A gun. But you can't hear the gun, it just went: "tshk." / Interpreter: A silent one. / Müller: And he always grabbed it, and up went a little cartridge with a Z, a little red cartridge. And he positions the two women – that was after the gassing, but not just one, many times – he positions the women, and the women

see that he is aiming at them. The woman – si klekla. / Judge: She trembles. / Interpreter: She knelt down. / Müller: She kneels. And she says, because she doesn't know what Stark is: "Commandant, I beg you, let me live. I haven't done anything." And: "Come on, Sarah, stand! Sarah stand! Sarah stand! Come on, you have to stand!" He speaks like that. That's how he speaks. He shoots first here or here, then again at the feet. The five, let's say, have to watch, the others. You can't describe this. And then he shoots them all. I don't want another memory like this, a terrible one. I'll say this: I see Stark my whole life long. My whole life. Wherever I go, I see him. Terrible.)

In the middle of this description of a horrific act of torture and murder – a description that is vital in order to achieve a verdict of murder, as Stark has acted on his own initiative and from 'base motives' – judge Hofmeyer attempts a translation. Müller is being supported by Stegmann's interventions, which here go a little beyond direct translation to become more active collaboration, in describing precisely what happened. His narration oscillates between past and present in German, characteristically for witnesses who are reliving an event that haunts them and to which they are not able to establish a healthy distance. The ambiguity of tenses causes some confusion in translation, as the speakers shift back and forth, attempting to get to grips with the extremity of the situation. Judge Hofmeyer provides his own, incorrect, translation, indicating that he is imagining the scene himself; the image of the woman trembling tells us something about his emotional response to the description, and shows us the power of first person witness accounts to produce parallel narrations within the hearer's mind, which can then emerge during translation exchanges.

This passage is taken up in the trial verdict, in which Stark is convicted of murder (though he was eventually sentenced under the youth penal code, as he was a minor at the time of his arrival at Auschwitz). Müller's evidence plays a specific role in the conviction of Stark, aside

from his detailed recall of the functioning of the gas chambers and the hierarchies of power within the crematoria: Müller provides evidence for the individual murder of Jewish women before they entered the gas chamber, and for killing from base motives in excess of the structures of authority and orders in the camp. In other words, it shows Stark acting on his own initiative.

In their summary of the evidence against Stark, the judges write:

Bei weiteren Vergasungen jüdischer Menschen im Mai 1942 nahm Stark häufig vor den Vergasungen einige jüdische Frauen beiseite. Wenn dann die anderen jüdischen Menschen in den Gaskammern waren, stellte er die Frauen im Hof des Kleinen Krematoriums an die Wand. Dann schoß er eine oder zwei Frauen in die Brust und in die Füße. *Wenn dann die anderen Frauen zitterten, auf die Knie fielen* und den Angeklagten Stark anflehten, sie am Leben zu lassen, schrie er sie an: ‘Sara, Sara, los, steh!’ Dann erschoss er sie alle nacheinander.<sup>viii</sup> [my italics]

(During further gassings of Jews in May 1942, Stark often took aside a few Jewish women before the gassing. When the other Jews were in the gas chambers, he stood the women against the wall in the courtyard of the small crematorium. Then he shot one or two women in the chest and in the feet. *When the other women trembled, fell to their knees* and begged the defendant Stark to let them live, he shouted: “Sara, Sara, come on, stand up!” Then he shot them all dead one after the other. [my italics])

Remarkably, the story told by the judges here includes Hofmeyer’s mistranslation of Müller’s Czech words, indicating in this small detail that Müller’s voice as witness is interwoven with Hofmeyer’s own narration. This text also includes Müller’s rendering of Stark’s speaking voice, here tidied up and translated into correct standard German: the voice of Stark that is imitated here is also a product of translation.

Thus, even here in a text predicated on the authenticity of witness testimony and the authority of judicial theory, translation is at work beneath the surface. First person witness statements invoke parallel narratives in the minds of the listeners, and translation is implicated here as a form of re-narration: in this situation, translators (including mistaken ones) produce their own visualization of the events described and work it into a new narrative in the target language.

Court interpreting, especially where the proceedings concern victims of violence, is often discussed in terms of perspective and the ethical problems arising from the question of how the interpreter positions him/herself between the victim and the institution, from the problem of identification with a victim, and from the range of possibilities for voicing a victim's speech. These questions are all highly relevant here – and it's worth remembering that the court had at that time no established standards for interpreting – but there's more going on here, too. The judge and interpreter appear to be producing their own inner narrative of the events, invoked by Müller's, but with their own slant – here, translation is mingling with the cognitive processes involved in responding to first person testimony narratives, and translation involves visualization and recreation in the mind, of the scene described.

Trial testimony provides a fascinating and instructive example of the collaborative production of witness narratives, with translation playing a key role. Transcripts and recordings such as these give us an important insight into how translation is implicated from the beginning of the process: it is not simply the post facto mediation of an already completed act of witnessing into another language. Instead, it makes witnessing possible.

We are also confronted with uncomfortable questions about the degree of control that a witness is able to exercise over the process of witnessing through translation (especially if a judge is likely to pay attention to his own inner visualization when formulating a verdict). As these extracts have shown, it is hard to generalize about the role of translation in the framing of an

act of witnessing, but making it visible allows us to begin to understand the network of relationships between individual agents, the specificity of the context with all its potential power imbalances, and the back-and-forth of collaboration, conflict, support and appropriation that we can find even within a single exchange.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial*; Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963–1965*; Wittmann, *Beyond Justice*.

<sup>ii</sup> Braese, *Rechenschaften*; Freudiger, *Die Juristische Aufarbeitung von NS-Verbrechen*; von Plato, “Vom Zeugen zum Zeitzeugen”; Renz, “Tonbandmitschnitte von NS-Prozessen als historische Quelle.”

<sup>iii</sup> A fuller account of the translation issues in Müller’s testimonies can be found in Davies, *Witness between Languages*, 264–335.

<sup>iv</sup> José Brunner’s analysis of the strategies adopted by witnesses in the Eichmann Trial is particularly useful here: Brunner, “Trauma in Jerusalem”.

<sup>v</sup> See Assmann, “Vier Grundtypen der Zeugenschaft.”

<sup>vi</sup> See Schmidt, *Ethik und Episteme der Zeugenschaft*.

<sup>vii</sup> ‘1. Frankfurter Auschwitz-Prozess, »Strafsache Gegen Mulka u.a.«; 4 Ks 2/63 Landgericht Frankfurt am Main; 97. Verhandlungstag, 5.10.1964 und 98. Verhandlungstag, 8.10.1964; Vernehmung des Zeugen Filip Müller’ (Fritz-Bauer-Institut <http://www.auschwitz-prozess.de/>; last accessed 24 April 2018).

<sup>viii</sup> Gross, *Der Frankfurter Auschwitz-Prozess (1963–1965)*, vol. 2, 751.

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# **The Liberation of Auschwitz in the Spanish press: From Connivance to Criticism**

## **Abstract:**

This article attempts to answer the key question regarding to what extent the Spanish population knew about the Holocaust. To accomplish this, the paper analyzes a significant chapter in history, namely, the liberation of Auschwitz by the Soviet troops in January 1945. Thanks to the analysis of a wide repertoire of Spanish newspapers published during the same year, it can be seen how the Spanish population was informed about this event within the context of Francoist dictatorship.

The analysis of these pieces of news by means of different media of the Spanish press of that time will enable us to answer a series of questions which have not been answered yet in the Spanish historiography such as: how were the accounts of the concentration camps, gas chambers, death marches and other atrocities committed against the prisoners? Why did it take such a long time for the Spanish press to publish the news which had been circulating in the foreign press?

**Keywords:** liberation of Auschwitz; Spanish press; Franco's regime, Spain and the Holocaust.

## **Introduction**

In Spain the development of World War II was followed with great interest given that its outcome could extol Franco's regime or, on the contrary, place it in a state of instability



and isolation within the New World Order. Once the balance of power was leaning towards the victory of the Allies, the Regime had to change its position and defend the supposed Spanish neutrality during the course of the conflict. From this new standpoint, which hid more than five years of Germanophilia, the control of the press by means of censorship was going to become a fundamental tool, for it played a dual role in terms of propaganda: domestic—for the Spanish society—and international—for the winning countries.

However, there were several events that occurred as a result of the progression of the conflict which left the Spanish press in an uncomfortable situation, not only from a political point of view, but also from an intellectual one. A conspicuous example can be seen in the freeing of Auschwitz by the Soviet troops on January 1945 and the subsequent publication of images, testimonies, and news in the international press over the following weeks. A few more months will have to go by, until the summer of that year, for the Spanish press to break the news of the events that had taken place in Auschwitz through the so-called Lüneburg process, undertaken against the authorities of the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz. Such a change of attitude in the press can be explained taking into account the position held by Spain on the international stage, particularly as regards its relationship with Hitler's Germany.

Although Spain did not go to war, its international stance on the two contending blocs changed enormously because of the vicissitudes of the war. This complexity is demonstrated by its changes in status: from neutrality (beginning of conflict), benevolent neutrality, non-belligerence (12 June 1940),<sup>i</sup> moral belligerence (Serrano Suñer, Spanish Foreign Minister, for the German newspaper *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 July 1941),<sup>ii</sup> and, finally, the return to neutrality (October 1, 1943).<sup>iii</sup> Spain was waiting for the right moment to go to war and, even though the country would never enter the conflict, Spain

always showed sympathy towards the Axis powers, either providing them with war-like supplies such as tungsten, or permission to resupply on Spanish soil for the German army, or as a basis for espionage, not to mention the well-known division of Spanish volunteers against the Soviet Union, the so-called “Blue Division.”<sup>iv</sup>

As a matter of fact, Franco was indebted to Italy and Germany due to their collaboration and aid prior to the Spanish Civil War. It is only in this context that one can understand the speech made by Franco in the Alcazar of Seville on February 14th and which is transcribed in the journal *El Hogar Español*:

But if there was any moment of danger, if the road to Berlin were not safe, not only would there be a division of Spanish volunteers helping, but also millions of Spanish would offer themselves to help. However, as I tell you, I am convinced that this will not be necessary.<sup>v</sup>

However, there were at least two pivotal factors that brought about a change in Spanish politics and the return to neutrality: the destitution of the Foreign Minister Serrano Suñer, who was ideologically closer to the Axis than his successor, Francisco Gómez Jordana, and a change in the balance of power after the first defeats of Germany and the participation of the United States in the conflict.<sup>vi</sup> Therefore, Spain faced one of the most peculiar situations in its history after the Operation Torch on November 1942.<sup>vii</sup> Spain was bordered by Germany to the north and the United States to the south: the Wehrmacht and the Army were only separated by the Iberian Peninsula.

It is evident, then, that Spain, as a “neutral” but Germanophile country, was able to keep a close relationship or, at least, a flexible one, with the Nazi authorities. On keeping its diplomatic representatives in the occupied countries, Spain was obviously aware of what was happening outside its nation. In addition, the Iberian Peninsula became a transitional

pass as well as an escape route from the atrocities of the war; as a result, it witnessed the several waves of refugees that made their way through the Pyrenees.<sup>viii</sup>

Bearing in mind these events, the present article attempts to answer two basic, yet crucial questions through the analysis of archive sources as well as newspapers of this period such as *Arriba*, *ABC*, *La Vanguardia Española*, *Destino*, *Informaciones* and *Ya*:

Was Franco's regime aware of the seriousness of the Holocaust? And, how was the Spanish population informed of the crimes committed in concentration and extermination camps?

### **The knowledge of the Spanish Government before the liberation of Auschwitz**

One of the first reports used as a proof of the atrocities committed in Nazi concentration camps dates to December 1941. Even at this early time, one Spanish delegation of doctors spoke of the ghettos in which the Jews were forced to live and the euthanasic practices that they had come across while visiting Austria and Poland.<sup>ix</sup> Later on, the Spanish government discovered the widespread use of the discriminatory measures, news of which was passed on by Jews holding Spanish nationality. Because of this, the Spanish Jews that were abroad had asked the Spanish diplomatic body for help, or at least, for exclusion from the anti-Semitic laws that were in practice in the occupied countries. An example of this can be seen in the letter addressed to Francisco Franco himself by the Spanish Jewish community resident in Marseille:

Spain has neither had nor has the misnamed racial Laws; but, even in the countries where this legislation is in effect because of circumstances which have nothing to do with Spain, such as Italy and Hungary for example, today given that its subjects of Israelite origin in France face imminent danger, its Consulates publish in the French press warnings so that before the 31<sup>st</sup> of the present month they should return

to their homeland [...], how is it possible that in the moments of prosecution and danger Spain leaves them exposed to concentration camps, forced labor or to deportation?<sup>x</sup>

The very same Spanish diplomats proclaim reports regarding the prosecution of Jewish based on testimonies, rumors or eye-witnesses (sometimes without giving them too much credibility); this is the case of the testimonies by Jozef Fischer, a Slovakian Jew, who tells of what is happening in the concentration camp of Sered' and who is sent to the Spanish Ministry of External Affairs: 'The bad treatment and the constant shooting outside the shacks had as their goal to arouse fear. The following day we were subdued to a meticulous cleaning control. The guards cut our hair and carried on with their corporal punishment so that some of us ended up with wounds.'<sup>xi</sup>

Afterwards, in 1944 more accurate reports make their way from several places, including Warsaw, London and Budapest:

It can be estimated that Germany has wiped out in different "ghettos" and Polish concentration camps between two million and a half to three million Jews during these tragic years and with the most horrible methods such as gas chambers and mass shootings. I myself have witnessed in the surroundings of Warsaw, in Otwock, and unwittingly of course, one of these "razzias," which cost the lives of a couple of thousands of Israelites. I also saw on the outskirts of Warsaw, a few meters from me, a cold-blooded murder by a German policeman. A girl of about 10 years old, and her brother, who was about 5 years old, who begged charity, were killed for the sole reason, of being Jews. Cases like these, I could cite them by hundreds.<sup>xii</sup>

In this document we find one of the first references to the Auschwitz camp:

During my stay in Krakow, I have witnessed the crossing of several goods trains, packed with Polish men and women, whose destination was concentration camps, situated in the Reich, specifically in Silesia. In Oswiecim (in German Auswitz) [sic] there are approximately 40,000 Polish confined, but those who I have seen passing through Krakow, were from Warsaw, and they were recently arrested on the streets of the capital or in their own homes.<sup>xiii</sup>

In fact, the most relevant news regarding Auschwitz within the Spanish diplomatic services came from Ángel Sanz Briz, who was in charge of Business in Budapest in 1944; he was also a diplomat and the first Spanish “Righteous Among the Nations.”<sup>xiv</sup> Briz sent a report about ‘the treatment given to Jews in the German concentration camps.’<sup>xv</sup>

As a corollary, we know that, at least from the end of 1941, the Spanish leaders were well aware, whether by the soldiers of the Blue Division, by its citizens abroad or by its diplomats, of the catastrophic conditions that the Jews were enduring and, later on, they also learned of the ill-fated consequences of the Nazi policy regarding prosecution, segregation and extermination. This is not a petty matter, for it implies that ‘the decisions about the concession or refusal of aid to the Jews were taken knowing the true threats that these people were facing.’<sup>xvi</sup>

In sum, the Spanish government knew what was happening, but this did not prevent it from making moves to protect the Jews. To illustrate, we find a text by the press attaché of the Spanish embassy in Lisbon to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the procedures of I. Weissman, the delegate of the World Congress of the Jewish Community (World Jewish Congress), who wanted Spain to intervene on behalf of 400 Jews and of all those who want to emigrate to Spain:

I think, my dear General, that we have an important card to play, which can perturb extraordinarily our enemies, earning much support and not making any commitment, since we can carry out actions which fit perfectly well with our moral duties that correspond with a neutral country and which are inspired in our Catholic ideology and the appeals that our Saint Father has been making as regards this issue.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **The Spanish Press during the Second World War**

In 1945, the Spanish Press could be divided into two main groups according to their ownership. On the one hand, there were the newspapers of the Movement, owned by the Falange (the Spanish fascist party), stemming from the confiscations carried out during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939); and, on the other hand, there were the privately-owned business newspapers authorized by the Francoist government, which included diaries of the Catholic Publishing House (Editorial Católica). Despite these seemingly distinct categories of business newspapers, however, the latter were practically as dependent on the Government as the Press of the Movement because of the agencies in charge of controlling them. The press chain of the Movement was a network of national and provincial newspapers headed by *Arriba*, ‘the true doctrinal organ of the regime that inspired the editorial line of the small provincial newspapers.’<sup>xviii</sup>

The intervention of the State in the press was glaringly obvious; in 1943, 37 out of the 111 Spanish diaries belonged to the Press of the Movement.<sup>xix</sup> In addition to this, there was fierce control of the press thanks to the Press Law of April 1938, promulgated during the Spanish Civil War to suppress the Republican press. This law established censorship as a tool of control because there had been ‘damage that a freedom understood in the democratic sense had done to a mass of readers who had been daily poisoned by a

sectarian and anti-nationalistic Press.’ Therefore, from that moment on, the journalist was supposed to become an ‘apostle of the way of thinking and the faith of the Nation redeemed to this destines.’<sup>xx</sup>

It is in this context that we need to understand that the news published in the Spanish press was similar across all the newspapers, especially if we consider that not only did the Regime establish censorship and the guidelines for all the newspapers, but it also controlled all the information coming from abroad thanks to the creation of the Agency EFE.

If we have a look at the press of the time, we can distinguish at least three stages regarding the position of Spain with Nazism, namely, connivance, which goes from before the outbreak of the military conflict to the defeat of Germany; prohibition, that is, the ban of news which is susceptible due to their content, for example, which showed any kind of Soviet success; and, finally, criticism of Nazism, once Germany had been defeated--although this criticism was full of nuances.

As regards the first stage, connivance, in 1939 the Falangist newspaper *Arriba España* published some testimonies about the Jews:

Poland has the worst disgrace that can take place in a country: there lived three million Jews and if only one Jew is abominable, that number must produce fetid miasmas in the military and catholic air of Poland.<sup>xxi</sup>

Other Spanish newspapers still had hope in Hitler’s victory: ‘the Germanic world of Hitler is serving deeply to the highest and eternal ends of the spirit. The triumph of these ends will be born the new order of Europe.’<sup>xxii</sup> This hope was never lost, even after the siege of Berlin, as can be seen in the journal *Informaciones*, a newspaper edited in Madrid and,

without any doubt, the most fervent pro-Nazi publication within the Spanish press, which reported about the death of Adolf Hitler in the following terms:

A promising Present! spreads throughout Europe, because Adolfo Hitler [sic, Hispanicized], son of the Catholic Church, has died defending Christendom [...]  
One day it will be understood that our pen, restrained now, cannot find the words to cry for his death when so many times it was able to extol his life. But Adolfo Hitler was born yesterday into the life of History with his insuperable humanly greatness. Above his mortal remains raises his victorious moral figure. With the palm of martyrdom, God bestows Hitler the laurel of victory. Because the deep and dense mystic that his death creates in Europe will end up triumphing over Mankind.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In the last years of the war and given the imminent defeat of the Axis powers, the instructions and orders to maintain the informative ‘pulchritude’ were reiterated. In this way, on June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944, a new decree was passed with the aim of keeping ‘informative objectivity’ so as to avoid ‘political sensationalism.’<sup>xxiv</sup>

But this supposedly informative objectivity was not to be respected in the case of the Soviet Union, as is made clear in the order of 21<sup>st</sup> August 1944 and repeated on September 5<sup>th</sup> of the same year:

The series of events has been favorable to the allies in this last stage of the war and our Press must reflect them accurately and with sound evidence. To spell it out—as mentioned—consider the following: all the importance and resonance will be given to the Anglo-Yankee events and the resonance will be reduced to the Russian ones, given that this sensationalism would be detrimental to our public opinion, igniting the possible internal communist current.<sup>xxv</sup>



Likewise, there is another order of 26<sup>th</sup> August 1944 which will enable us to understand how the information regarding the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps (up to this date this was absent in the Spanish press) would be given because: ‘the newspapers should reduce to a minimum the headlines of these tragic consequences of the war’ and especially those caused by Germany.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The control of the Spanish press served as a faithful reflection of the adaptation of the Spanish government to the Second World War while showing an evident Germanophile and anti-communist position at all times.

### **The liberation of Auschwitz in the Spanish Press**

Despite the fact that months will have to go by for Spain to shed some light onto the Holocaust, in the international press, there had been news, though scarce and succinct at the beginning, of what had happened in the concentration camps, or at least of what was believed to be happening to the Jews living in the occupied territories. An example of this is the report given by an active group in Poland to Mr. S. Zygielboim, a Jewish representative in the National Polish Council in London, who published an article with the headline: ‘Germans Murder 700,000 Jews in Poland.’ The article mentions the existence of special vans that used gas to kill Jews, as well as the Nazi extermination policy that had begun in 1941 in the east part of Galitzia (*The Telegraph*, June 25, 1942). The Soviet press also informed the public of what was happening: Majdanek had been mentioned before its liberation by A. Aleksandrova (*Trud*, January 7, 1944).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Auschwitz, as is well known, was liberated on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1945. The first newspaper to break the news was *Pravda* in an article by Boris Polevoi published on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945, where no explicit mention was made to the Jews (a fact that was reported in the official investigation of May 1945).<sup>xxviii</sup> Shortly after this, the North

American and British press echoed such news (*New York Times*, February 2, 1945 and *The Daily News*, February 3). Nevertheless, the Spanish people were kept in the dark following the aforementioned press guidelines which avoided reports of Soviet success.

However, in Spain there was news regarding these territorial conquests. In fact, one of the most popular pieces of news among the Spanish population was the war reports and, at this point, there were several pieces of news in different Spanish newspapers that dealt with the conquest of the Soviet army over the territories of Upper Silesia (*Arriba*, January 28, 1945 and *Hoja del Lunes*, January 29, 1945). Later, a Catalanian journal would publish the first reference to the concentration camp of Auschwitz (*La Vanguardia Española*, February 2, 1945):

The French radio disseminates information of the French journal “Soir”, according to which, two hundred thousand war prisoners and deported people, freed by the Russian army in its advance, would arrive in France in two months [...] The deported ones comes from the concentration camps of Lodz, Czestochowa, Oswiecim and Mirkenau [sic].

On the very same page, however, there is a column with the headline ‘Better captivity amid the Germans than freedom with the Soviets.’ The story explains that, according to news from Berlin, it was British prisoners of war who had made these declarations before being freed.

It will not be until some months later, specifically until the liberation of the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen or of Buchenwald by the Americans or British, that the Spanish population were informed of the events that took place in the concentration camps. The findings made by the Soviet army after the liberation of Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau were kept hidden.

About Belsen and Buchenwald, the reports of the journals *La Vanguardia Española* and *ABC* were extensive, relating information from London about the resolution of the British Parliamentary Commission, which travelled *in situ* to Buchenwald at the end of April 1945. Shortly afterwards, on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1945, Carlos Sentís, a correspondent for the abovementioned newspapers, wrote a long article in which he showed the atrocities that he had encountered in the concentration camp of Dachau. Beneath the article, there is an additional piece of news that mentions one concentration camp that had been freed by the Soviets: Treblinka.<sup>xxix</sup>

It will not be until the start of the Trial of Belsen in Lüneburg on September 1945 that the events that took place in the East of Europe became known thanks to the testimonies by witnesses and the arrests of war criminals.<sup>xxx</sup> Spain continued showing reluctance to openly talking about the Jews; news such as those of the journal *Imperio* disseminated information about the arrival of survivors from German concentration camps to Spain with references to gas chambers and crematory ovens. However, little attention was paid to the human group that goes to Palestine; instead, the conclusion of the article draws attention to the ‘thousands of priests, Catholics and Protestants’ that also suffered there.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Since the beginning of the war trials carried out by the British, a wide repertoire of daily news were published with figures, in most instances exaggerated, whose aim was to arouse morbidity rather than to provide truthful information, with headlines like: ‘Four million people died in the concentration camp of Auschwitz,’ in which the accusation of the Jewish-Polish doctor Ada Bimko, who spoke of the atrocities of Auschwitz and the selective processes for the gas chambers, was recounted.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In sum, it is not until the Allies start to judge the war criminals and, later on, the crimes against humanity in the Nuremberg Trials that Spain would provide detailed information

about the crimes committed on the Eastern Front. What remains now, however, is the way this news was delivered.

### **Rewriting History**

In light of these events it was evident that Franco's Regime had to change its standpoint regarding Nazism. What was at stake was not only the issue regarding the horrors that happened (since Spain did not criticize such events during World War II), but the necessity to keep its distance from the Axis powers and, therefore, the need to criticize its former ally.

This "white wash" of the Regime translated into an intense propaganda campaign that included official documents whose aim was to avoid the international isolation of Spain in the aftermath of the war. In the hope of joining the UN, Spain sent several official biased publications to foreign organizations. Such is the case of the leaflet "Spain and the Jews," translated into English and French:

Spain, imbued with its universal Christian spirit of love for all the races on earth, contributed to the rescue of Jews, and acted more for spiritual than for merely legal or political reasons, extended not only to Spanish Jews. Our government's aid was extended not only to Spanish Jews dispersed throughout the Continent, but also, whenever the opportunity presented itself, to all Jews irrespective of their nationality or their place of residence.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This does not mean that the Spanish press re-examined the history of the Holocaust in an objective way; instead, they made tried to make the case that such a situation would never have happened in Spain. Good proof of this is found in the column written by Eugenio Montes, a journalist, politician, writer and member of the Royal Spanish Academy:

It was the Malign who tangled up everything to sow discord amid the Western Christian family, exposing it divided, torn up, the vulnerable prey for the anti-Christ. The Prussian will is more valuable, and more noble than the Russian one. But Germany is at war with half of the world, and the horde advances over a wounded continent, infuriated and almost bloodless.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Probably the best example of this biased re-interpretation of history was the case of Irma Grese, which added a religious and moral dimension to the phenomenon of the concentration camps:

German concentration camps are unparalleled, certainly, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone. The case of Irma Greese [sic] is bloodcurdling, but it is only the most striking case, and above all, the most visible one, of a youth exposed to the most terrible ravings for having lost the ancient beliefs, having mocked of morality and having detached from home: the outstanding example, in a single word, of all the girls who want to “live their lives.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

On a basic level, this suggests that the Holocaust happened neither because of a nationalised anti-Semitic sentiment, nor due to a totalitarian ideology that ignited the systematic biological extermination, but rather by a corruption of Christian values and the debauchery of women and the so-called ‘modern’ youth.

## **Conclusions**

As has been shown, the position held by the Spanish press during the Second World War was evidently pro-Axis and was faithful to this ideology till the very end of the conflict. Once Germany had been defeated, the press opened, step by step, to the international news (as long as this did not come from Moscow), albeit the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon was reinterpreted according to Francoist ideology.

The information provided to the Spanish population about the concentration camps was scarce, and it was framed within the context of war crimes committed by all the parties involved in the conflict. This article has only shown a small fraction, fundamentally the year 1945, of what should be a more thorough study in terms of Spanish historiography. It goes without saying that the field of Holocaust Studies in Spain is still in its infancy although in recent years some headway has been made in order to address this issue.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Preston, *Franco: Caudillo de España*, 446. The no belligerency position was not a category recognized within international law, but rather an invention made by Mussolini on September 1939 which Spain resorted to with the objective of getting ready for an ante-bellum stage, awaiting Franco's orders to fight in the war. See Payne, *Franco y Hitler*; Suárez, *Franco y el III Reich*.

<sup>ii</sup> Preston, *Franco: Caudillo de España*, 546.

<sup>iii</sup> Tusell, *Franco, España y la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, 445.

<sup>iv</sup> Spain became "a nest of spies" for both Allies and Axis potencies during World War II. See Juárez, *Madrid-Londres-Berlín*. For further information regarding the "División Azul", see Moreno, *La División Azul*; Núñez, *Camarada invierno*.

<sup>v</sup> *El Hogar Español*, 21 de febrero de 1942. Wingeate, *Franco y el Eje*, 175.

<sup>vi</sup> Tusell, "La Etapa Jordana", 169.

<sup>vii</sup> Name given to the Allied invasion of French North Africa.

<sup>viii</sup> Belot, *Aux frontières de la liberté*. In this sense one finds the maps drawn and compiled by the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* 'Jewish Emigration from Germany 1933-1940' y 'Escape-routes from German-Occupied Europe 1942.'

[https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_nm.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=467](https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=467) and [https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_nm.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=361](https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=361).

<sup>ix</sup> Rother, *Franco y el Holocausto*, 125.

<sup>x</sup> Archivo General de la Administración 54/4773. Letter to the National Leader Mr. Francisco Franco written on 9th March 1943 in Marseille. There are more letters of a similar sort, but none of them was ever given an answer.

<sup>xi</sup> Confidential report sent by the group of legates of Spain in Bratislava to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Bratislava, on 16th April 1943. AGA 82/05245. The same Spanish diplomat would write: 'The news received from Poland, all agreed that, of expatriate Jews, there would be no more talk.'

<sup>xii</sup> Confidential report of the Representative in charge of the Interests of Spain in Warsaw to the Ambassador of Spain in Berlin (Ginés Vidal y Saura) written in Prague on August 28<sup>th</sup> 1944. AGA 82/06665.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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- <sup>xiv</sup> Distinction granted by Yad Vashem, an award he received in 1966.
- <sup>xv</sup> The Sanz Briz Report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the events that are taking place in Auschwitz, in Budapest on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1944. AGA 82/05247. For further information about the role played by Sanz Briz, see Lisbona, *Más allá del deber*, 81-100.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Rother, Franco y el Holocausto, 129.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Document written on behalf of the Embassy of Spain in Lisbon to Gómez-Jordana (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) written by the press attaché of the embassy, Javier Martínez de Bedoya, on April the 11<sup>th</sup> 1944. AGA 82/05247. Martínez de Bedoya starts his text with the sentence: '[...] I want to talk to you about an issue which can be advantageous for the sake of Spain,' which shows the interest that Spain had to become an ally with the Allies and mask its ideological connection with the potencies of the Axis at the end of the war.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Sevillano, *Propaganda y medios*, 179.
- <sup>xix</sup> Fuentes y Fernández, *Historia del periodismo español*, 254. Cited in Alía, "La prensa histórica española," 106.
- <sup>xx</sup> Boletín Oficial del Estado, nº 550, April 24<sup>th</sup> 1938.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Lisbona, *Retorno a Sefarad*, 100. To understand the anti-Semitic sentiment in Spain, please refer to the work by Álvarez, *El antisemitismo en España*.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Solidaridad Nacional*, 14/07/1940.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Informaciones*, 02/05/1945. In the pro-Nazi propaganda the figure of Josef Hans Icaza stood out. He oversaw the propaganda of the Third Reich in Spain and had large funds to "recommend" the publications in important Spanish newspapers. See Rozenberg, *La España contemporánea*, 178.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Río, *Viraje político español*, 335.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Sinova, *La censura de Prensa*, 226. The document is found in Archivo General de la Administración, Servicio de Cultura, Ministerio de Información y Turismo, caja 1140.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Río, *Viraje político español*, 338.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish eyes*, 153. Also quoted in David-Fox, Michael, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, eds. *The Holocaust in the East*, 107.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 46. As the author superbly states: 'Besides, the liberation of the camp was not a key strategic aim of the Red Army, which was simply attempting to advance westwards as swiftly as possible,' *ibid*. It must be remembered that Auschwitz had been previously mentioned in *Pravda* (Yitshak, "The Holocaust as Reflected," 217).
- <sup>xxix</sup> 'Three million Poles found dead in a concentration camp,' apart from the exaggerated figure, in no moment are Jews mentioned (*La Vanguardia Española*, May 15, 1945). Before this, some photographs of the German concentration camps had been published in the Spanish press: "a pile of corpses of "allied soldiers" awaiting to be cremated entitled 'Los horrores de la guerra' ('The horrors of the war') (*ABC*, April 26, 1945) and, later on, another photograph of the very same camp showing a common grave full of corpses (*ABC*, May 6, 1945).
- <sup>xxx</sup> It is interesting to note that the Republican press in the exile echoed news of what was happening in Auschwitz well before the national press. In this way, the journal *España Popular*, edited in Mexico (a traditional place of refuge for many Spanish republicans) and, basing his information on Soviet newspapers, explains: 'The "ghettos" of Warsaw and Lublin, the camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz with their thousands of innocent victims sacrificed to the modern Moloch who was called "superior race" [...] The services the Red Army has rendered to the suffering humanity were great and extraordinary' (*España Popular*, April 27, 1945). In the very same newspaper there is a report dated 29<sup>th</sup> April from Paris: 'Thousands of Spaniards sacrificed by the Nazis in Germany': 'The Spaniards have also suffered the tragedy of the winters of Nazi Germany [...] Our brethren are an integral part of the tragedies of Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Birkenau, etc.' (*España Popular*, May 11, 1945).
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Imperio*, September 2, 1945.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Imperio*, September 22, 1945.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> *España y los judíos*, Oficina de Información Diplomática, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 1949. Translated in Linhard, *Jewish Spain*, 22 y Gerber, *The Jews of Spain*, 264.

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Arriba*, February 6, 1945.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Destino*, October 13, 1945.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> As reflected in the Organic Law 8/2013, dated on 9th December, to improve the Quality of Education (Official Bulletin of the State, 10th December 2013) and likewise in the Royal Decree 1105/2014, dated 26th December, whereby the curriculum of the Mandatory Secondary Education and High School is outlined (Official Bulletin of the State, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2015).



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- General Administration Archive, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid.
- José Antonio Lisbona: Spanish documents about Auschwitz.

# **Relations between Spain and Auschwitz: an Approximation Through Different Groups of Victims**

## **Abstract:**

Although upheld for decades by the Franco regime and its supporters, Spanish neutrality in World War Two is a myth. While all neutral countries implemented corresponding policies at various points during the war, the nearly consistent, one-sided, pro-Axis attitude of the Franco regime stood out. This article addresses this complexity and attempts to shed light on an intricate history that has also been obscured by decades of post-war mythmaking. This paper looks at the fate of Spanish Jews during the Holocaust and will create direct links to Auschwitz by telling the stories of some of those who were deported there.

The methodology used was through research in several archives and interviews with descendants or relatives of some of the victims. The archives used were: International Tracing Service, Yad Vashem, Memorial de la Shoah, Amical Mauthausen, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya and Arxiu SIDIBRINT, Universitat de Barcelona.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz, Spain, Political Prisoners, Jews

## **Spanish Political Prisoners**

With the military defeat of the Legal Spanish Government of the Republic, due to the Coup d'Etat of General Franco and after three years of Civil War, nearly half a million people

had to go into exile, escaping from the possible repression of the new government. The easiest way to do so was across the Pyrenes. Once they had fled, the French Government settled them in internment camps near the Spanish border in the south of France. From those, at the end of 1939, approximately 80,000 would immigrate to America, Portugal and England and 4000 to the Soviet Union.

However, the French government considered the Spanish “undesirable reds” and, in an attempt to force the new immigrants out, it gave them two choices: either to return to Spain or, if they decided to stay, they could enlist in the French army, in the Foreign Legion, Marching Regiments or the *Compagnies de travailleurs étrangers* (CTE).

Some 50,000 enlisted in the CTE under the orders of the army and were assigned to fortification works. Following the German invasion, around 5,000 died in combat and thousands more were captured and taken to the prison camps (*Frontstalag and Stalags*).

Nineteen camps situated in France, Germany, Austria and Poland had Spanish prisoners.

After the ratification of Marshall Petain’s armistice, the Republicans caught in occupied France were considered enemies of the Reich in the same way as Germans, Italians or Czechs who fought against Nazi Germany. They were classified as *Rotspanier*. Because the French army did not recognize them as full military, it was easy for the Wehrmacht to give them to the RSHA and send them to Nazi Concentration Camps. The first transport to Mauthausen arrived from Moosberg Stalag in August 1940.

Moreover, Franco’s regime refused to consider the *Rotspanier* as Spanish citizens so they earned the label of “undesirable stateless.” By June 1941, about 6,000 such prisoners were in Nazi concentration camps. Later on, more were arrested as members of the French

Resistance. Overall, the Nazis murdered between 7,500 and 10,000 Spaniards, and pressed many others into forced labour in the Third Reich or as part of the Todt Organization.

For those in Vichy France, there were several possibilities: some were interned again in French Camps, where, being considered dangerous, they shared space with Jews and Roma on their way to deportation. The ones who belonged to the CTE later became part of the *Groupements de travailleurs étrangers*; many of them were forced to the *Service du travail obligatoire* (STO) and sent to Germany or to the Todt Organization.

Meanwhile, the ones who had managed to escape forced enlistment were pioneers in the resistance movements against the Nazi occupation. They took up arms in the Spanish *Maquis*, or guerrillas, or as liaisons or mail runners. The ones who fell into Gestapo hands faced long prison sentences, forced labor or execution. After the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944, the Germans sent the condemned to concentration camps.

Although Mauthausen was the main destination of the Republican deportees, they were also present in the main Nazi camps: Buchenwald, Dachau, Neuengamme, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, and Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, 64 personal records of Spaniards have been identified to date, of which 29 were classified as political deportees. Of those, 18 were deported directly to Auschwitz in transports from France and the rest arrived from other Nazi camps.

In this group of 18 Spanish political prisoners in Auschwitz, there were three women. In total, eight Spanish victims are known to have perished there.

### **SPANISH PRISONERS WHO DIED IN AUSCHWITZ**

Martín	Miguel	Sigüenza(Guadalajara)	10-08-1942
Martín	Ángel	Bilbao (Vizcaya)	30-08-1942
Corteilllo	Joaquín	València	01-09-1942
Manello	Rafael	Tabarca(Alicante)	30-01-1943
Monter Ferris	Pedro	Binaced (Huesca)	22-02-1943
Goñi Ayestarán	Luz Higinia	Ciraqui(Navarra)	01-05-1943
García Aragón	Enrique	Cullera(València)	06-10-1944
Alonso Alonso	Maria	Santa Fe (Almeria)	27-02-1943

Two brief biographies personify the experiences of this group. The first one corresponds to an anti-fascist combatant in the Spanish War who went into exile, was arrested by the Germans and later deported. The second is that of an economic emigrant who was living in France, before being arrested and later deported because of her participation in the Resistance.

### ***Pedro Monter Ferris***

Pedro Monter Ferris was born in Binaced (Huesca) on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1900. He moved to Sabadell in 1927. He married Esperanza Fernández Santín, who had arrived in Sabadell in 1922 from the town of Ruitelan (León), where she was born. The couple had two children,

Antonia (1932) and Alfredo (1938). According to personal records held at the Arxiu Històric Sabadell, Pedro worked as an ‘agricultural laborer.’ However, according to Francesc (Antonia's son),<sup>i</sup> his grandfather ‘worked setting up electric transmission towers’ and, from what he heard from his grandmother, he was a member of either the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC)* or the *Confederació Nacional del Treball (CNT)*.<sup>ii</sup>

Pedro had to go into exile and Esperanza had to take care of the two children and their mother. In 1946, she received a death certificate, issued by the Klagenfurt State Political Police, notifying her of her husband’s death at Auschwitz on 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 1943.<sup>iii</sup>

But it was not until May 2010 that Francesc learned about his grandfather's experiences, which had been somewhat particular compared with that of other Spanish Republicans. According to the file held at Dachau,<sup>iv</sup> Pedro had entered the camp on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1941, identified as "Spanish prisoner" (*Rotspanier*). This in itself was rare since, starting in the summer of 1940, the Republicans identified by the Gestapo in the POW camps were deported to Mauthausen. Only one Spaniard had been admitted to Dachau in 1940, and 14 in 1941; half of those had come from Mauthausen. For the other seven, including Pedro, Dachau was their first destination; the starting point of their deportation is currently unknown. On October 1942 Pedro was transferred to Auschwitz where he died in February 1943.<sup>v</sup>

### ***Feliciano Pinto Navas***

Feliciano was born on 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1914 in El Barraco (Ávila). She went to France as part of the flow of economic migrants that arrived in the 30’s. In 1936 she married Joseph

Raymond Bierge, adopting his surname; from then on, she was known as Feliciana Bierge. During the Spanish Civil War, the couple carried out various solidarity actions with the Republican civilian population who were exiled in France. They gave them shelter and provided economic guarantees so that they would be able to stay in France.

After the German occupation, the couple clandestinely settled in Villenave d'Ordon, near Bordeaux, and were members of the *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans Français (FTP)* in the Gironde. Two printing presses were installed in their home, from which newspapers and leaflets were distributed to nearby factories and towns. Feliciana was also the agent who guaranteed the connection between the person in charge of propaganda in the region and the General Staff by providing both parties with weapons and information.

Betrayed by a comrade, the Bierges were arrested in July 1942. Joseph was shot on 21<sup>st</sup> of September of the same year.<sup>vi</sup> Feliciana was imprisoned in Romainville prison; from there, she and her colleagues were transferred to Compiègne for deportation.<sup>vii</sup>

On 24<sup>th</sup> of January 1943, the only transport containing French political detainees was sent to Auschwitz.<sup>viii</sup> Alongside Feliciana were two other Spanish women from the FTP: Maria Alonso and Lucia Martin. Feliciana remained in Auschwitz until 1944, when she and 30 other deportees from her group were transferred to Ravensbrück. Due to the advance of Soviet troops, the Nazis evacuated the camp in early January and transferred 2,500 prisoners to Mauthausen, including Feliciana. She remained there until the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, when the camp authorities handed over a group of deportees of French origin to the International Red Cross.<sup>ix</sup>



Feliciano was fortunate enough to be one of the survivors, but her story fades into anonymity. To her biography we can only add that she was able to rebuild her life in Bordeaux. She married for a second time, becoming Mrs. Labrugere. She also spent time telling her story to relatives of friends who had perished in the camps. She died on January 11th 1996.

### **Spanish Labour**

It is estimated that there were approximately 50,000 Spanish forced-labour or general workers in Nazi Germany. According to records held in the Auschwitz archives, a number of Spanish nationals worked in Monowitz.<sup>x</sup> They probably belong to the group of 10,500 Spaniards contracted by the Nazi Ministry of Labour in agreement with Franco's government through an inter-ministerial commission for sending workers to Germany called the *Comisión Interministerial para el envío de trabajadores a Alemania*, or CIPETA.<sup>xi</sup> Until now, little information was known about their identity.

### **Jews in the International Brigades**

The case of the Jews in the International Brigades (IB) demonstrates the complexity of Holocaust Memory. Until very recently, the recognition and memory of the role of the Jews in the IB have not been present, neither for left-wing supporters nor for Jewish communities. In Spain, this point of history has been almost-entirely ignored; for example, links between the IB Jews and the Holocaust are virtually non-existent.

The International Brigades were paramilitary units created by the Communist International to assist the government of the Popular Front of the Second Spanish Republic during the

Spanish Civil War. The organization lasted for two years, from 1936 to 1938. It is estimated that throughout the war, between 32,000 and 35,000 members served in the IB, including 15,000 who died in combat.

Although Jews are still often stereotyped as shy or submissive, the reality is that thousands of Jews from 53 countries fought and died against Franco. Some were open about their Jewish identity while others hid behind aliases; some altered the battalions of their country of birth or adoption, others did the same thing with other national groups; some were freely directed towards Spain from other democratic countries, others were fleeing from antisemitism or political oppression; many were already in Spain before the war started. In addition, thousands of Jews from all over the world showed solidarity through various solidarity organizations, which were used to raise funds or help the Republic.<sup>xii</sup>

But not all Jewish movements and parties stimulated the participation of their members in the International Brigades to the same extent. For example, Dov Lieberman, who arrived in Spain from Belgium, said that *Hashomer Hatzair*, a leftist Zionist movement, had warned that the war in Spain was not about Jews. This was the Zionist position everywhere, especially in Palestine, where the idea that young pioneers would leave their national struggle to go to Spain was not well received. In fact, the press hardly mentioned the IB until the conflict was well advanced.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Where did the Brigadists come from?**

The total number of Jews who fought in the IB ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 men and women.<sup>xiv</sup> In many countries, the majority of the Jews were not identified as such because they were not accounted for. This is the case of the Soviet Union. The proportion of Jews

was also quite high in healthcare resources: 59 of the 124 American health teams were Jewish (48%), as were almost all of the 40 Polish doctors.

There are three main reasons for the high number of Jews in the International Brigades. First, the fact that many of them were already in Spain before the outbreak of the Civil War. Second, the Jews were the ones who best understood the threat of the fascist, nationalist and antisemitic governments in Europe: in Germany and in Italy, but also in Hungary, Austria, Romania, Poland, among others. Finally, the government of the Republic explicitly welcomed the Jews in the country.<sup>xv</sup>

There were several groups, including the Hapoel Jewish sports association, whose members were in Barcelona to participate in the People's Olympiad. When the war broke out, they were the first to offer themselves to fight for the Republic, and although most were Communists or belonged to the Bund<sup>xvi</sup> revolutionary party, their status as Jews reinforced their commitment.

Another important group was the Geserd organization (Society for Jewish agricultural colonization in the USSR), a Zionist organization within the Soviet Union. The group was established to collect funds for Birobidjan, an Autonomous Territory within the USSR created in 1930; the area was populated with Communist Jews from all over the world who had moved to find the dream of a Communist Jewish homeland. Nearly all the members of this organization volunteered to fight in Spain.<sup>xvii</sup>

Men of these groups were the ones that formed the first international unit, the Jüdische Gruppe Thälman. The group had 18 members, 13 of which were German and Polish Jews and only 5 were gentiles. There were 16 men and two women. Among them were Max

Friedemann and his wife Golda, as well as the Polish Jew Chaim Besser and Emanuel Mink, who later became the commander of the Botwin Brigade.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **The Botwin Company**

The Botwin Company was formed on December 12, 1937 in Tardienta. It was part of the thirteenth Polish Dombrowski Brigade of the 2nd Palafox Battalion. It was named in honour of Naftali Botwin, a Polish Jew, executed in 1925 for having assassinated a Polish secret police officer. One of the characteristics of the Company was that it used three languages in its orders and banners: Yiddish, Polish and Spanish. It also edited a newspaper written in Yiddish, first published on December 30, 1937. The Botwins included the only two Arabs of the IB, one of which was from Jerusalem and spoke Yiddish.

After the Spanish Civil War, most Botwins joined the maquis and other partisan groups during World War Two; many of the men died while fighting against the Nazis. Charles Fawcett was an American working in Paris for the Varian Fry group; he helped various people, including members of the military, Jews and other refugees, to escape through the Pyrenees. He reported that the Botwin Company contained many Jews who had been part of the Brigades and who knew very well the routes to pass to Spain; they were also well informed of the tasks of the resistance.<sup>xix</sup>

Emanuel Mink is a good example of the fate of Polish Communist Jews in the Botwin Company. Born on April 23, 1910 in Tomaszów, Poland, he immigrated to Belgium in 1935. From there, he went to Barcelona to compete in the People's Olympiad. He joined the first brigade to fight for the Republic in July 1936. In February 1939 with the withdrawal of the Republicans forces, he arrived in France where he was interned in different camps: Gurs,

Argelers and Saint-Cyprien. From there, he managed to escape alongside other comrades and joined the Resistance. On August 20th, during the summer raids against Jews, he was captured and interned in Drancy on August 20, 1941. From there, he was deported to Auschwitz with transport n. 1 on March 27, 1942. Mink was one of the active resistance agents in the camp. In October 1944, he was transferred to Stutthof then Natzweiler, from where he was released. In 1949, he returned to Poland, but in 1969, due to the wave of antisemitism that had swept the country,<sup>xx</sup> he was forced to leave; he immigrated to France where he died in Paris on March 29 of 2008.<sup>xxi</sup>

There were many brigadists who ended up in Concentration Camps. According to SIDBRINT data, there were 60 in Auschwitz,<sup>xxii</sup> 70 in Buchenwald, 456 in Dachau, 48 in Mauthausen, 23 in Sachsenhausen, 36 in Unspecified Nazi Camps, and 118 in Spanish Camp in Miranda de Ebro.

Of the 60 brigadists in Auschwitz, we only know the precise journeys of 36 for certain. Of those, 29 were Jews. Only 2 survived. As with the Republicans, two biographies will be used as examples of their fate.

### **Betty Rosenfels and Sally Wittelson**

Betty Rosenfeld was born in Stuttgart in 1907 to a middle-class family. She was a nurse and worked in a hospital. When Hitler came to power, she left Germany with her sisters to go to Palestine. In March 1937 she decided to go to Spain and joined the Brigades. There, she worked in different hospitals. In Barcelona, she met and married another volunteer of the XI Brigades, Sally Wittelson. In 1938 they crossed the Pyrenees and, in June 1939, they were interned for being stateless in different French camps. In August 7, 1942, Betty was

transferred to Drancy while her husband was still at Le Vernet. On September 7, 1942, both were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where they were assassinated.

### **Anna and Hermann Pecznik**

Hermann Pecznik was born on January 27, 1901 in Chorniakowka in Galitzia; he later immigrated to Vienna. Anna, his wife, was born February 9, 1911 in Sofia; her maiden name was Gadol. Both were Jews and members of the Communist party in Vienna. They were both arrested in 1934. It is possible that they escaped to Prague; later they went to Paris and, in 1937, to Spain. They both joined the Brigades, he as a political commissar and Head of the historic department of the Brigades in Albacete and she as a nurse. She travelled with false papers to France in 1938. Later on, she went to Austria and worked for the Resistance but was arrested and deported, first to Ravensbruck and later on to Buchenwald. It was there that she was shot dead in either 1944 or 1945.<sup>xxiii</sup> As for Hermann, he retreated to France and, as with all the Spaniards who fought for the Republic, was interned in several French camps, including Gurs, St. Cyprien and Le Vernet. In 1942, he was sent to Drancy; from there, he was deported to Auschwitz with transportation n. 21 on August 19, 1942, where he died in October 20 of the same year.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Jews in Spain**

Although Jews had been forced out of Spain by the edict of 1492, by 1840, they had started to return. There are two main Jewish groups: those of Ashkenazi origin that came from Central and Eastern Europe, and those that came from North Africa and Gibraltar. Later on, during the First World War, a new wave of immigrants came to Spain from Russia and

from the Balkans. Finally, the last wave of immigrants before the war came from Germany or occupied territories because of Nazism.

However, with the outbreak of the Civil War, many Jews left Spain, travelling mainly to France and to the Netherlands. Others did it once the Civil War was over in 1939. Some of them would be captured and deported to Auschwitz.

### **Jews in Auschwitz**

Overall, around 70 Jews born in Spain were deported to Auschwitz from various European settings. Most of these were deported from Drancy, though some also went through Westerbork. Thanks to the research done in Auschwitz archives, Yad Vashem and in the ITS, it has been possible to reconstruct some of their journeys.

José Levy Benasayg was born on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1901 in Tetuan, in the Protectorate. He was captured in France where he lived at 74, rue La Fayette in Paris. He had worked as a General Manager. He was sent to Drancy and stayed in Block 4 until he was deported to Auschwitz on transport no. 36 on September 23, 1942, where he was murdered.<sup>xxv</sup>

Rachel Gutrajde was born in Barcelona on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1932. Her mother, Rywka Sikora Gutrajde, born October 22, 1907 in Warsaw, was arrested in France and taken to Drancy, where she was deported to Auschwitz with transport n. 22 on August 21, 1942. Rachel's father, Szachma Gutrajde, was born in Warsaw on March 14, 1902. He was deported from Compiègne to Auschwitz with transport n. 2 on June 5, 1942.<sup>xxvi</sup> Presumably, the family was in Spain before the war, where Rachel was born. Rachel survived thanks to being delivered to a children's aid organization in France during the war.

Isidore Nissim Toros was born in Barcelona on March 3, 1916. He was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz with transport n. 3 on June 22, 1942. His sister, Sabatia Morand, was born in Barcelona on 20th August 1920. She arrived in Drancy in February 1944, and was deported to Auschwitz with transport n. 69,<sup>xxvii</sup> where they died. Both were living in France when they were arrested.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The Berkmann family were also victims of Nazi violence. Oro, the mother, was born in Barcelona in April 24, 1918.<sup>xxix</sup> Her brother-in-law, Henri, was born on February 10th of the same year in Paris.<sup>xxx</sup> Her son was born on July 31, 1941, in Marseille.<sup>xxxi</sup> The whole family resided in Marseille when they were captured and sent to Drancy on December 15, 1943. They were deported to Auschwitz with transport n. 63 on December 17th 1943; they were killed on arrival.

Nissim Eskenazi, born in Barcelona on June 2, 1916, was deported with transport n. 3 from Drancy in June 22, 1942.<sup>xxxii</sup> According to the death certificate issued by the Auschwitz camp, he died of a heart attack on July 6th, 1942.

Sarah Leon was born in Madrid on January 12, 1890. She was deported from Drancy to Sobibor with transport n. 53 in March 25, 1943.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The Delvaille family<sup>xxxiv</sup> had six members: Emile, born 5th April 1893 in Sevilla; Carmen born 12<sup>th</sup> October 1890 in Leon Landes; Renée, born 27<sup>th</sup> November 1900 in Bayonne; Marcel, born 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1894 in Biarritz; Sara, born 8<sup>th</sup> July 1921 in Biarritz; and Mardoché, born 30<sup>th</sup> October 1926 in Bayonne. All were deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on transport n. 64, December 7, 1943.<sup>xxxv</sup>



Samuel Albohair was born in Barcelona on February 15, 1916. He was detained in Sant Martí de les Heres (France) and transferred to Drancy on June 3, 1944. He, along with his wife, Rajzla (born in Poland), and her son, Daniel (born in June 1941 in Sant Martí de les Heres<sup>xxxvi</sup>), were sent to Auschwitz on transport n. 76 from Drancy. The Yad Vashem database suggests that all three were murdered by the Nazis, but the database of the Memorial Democratic based in the ITS archive, indicates that Samuel survived. He was transferred from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, then to Natzweiler and Dachau. He was released from Sigmaringen.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The Corkhidi family had four members: the father, Beno, who was born in Smyrne; the mother, Rachel, was born in Thessaloniki; the eldest son, Denise, was born in Barcelona in 1924; and the youngest, Gerard, was born in Marseille in 1932. They were all deported from Drancy to Auschwitz with transport n. 74 on May 20, 1944.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Three others were on the same transport: Rafael Levy, who was born in Barcelona in 1915, his wife Donna, and Isaak Saban. Isaak was born in Bursa, Turkey, but had lived in Spain before World War II. All three were in Marseille from where they were deported.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The Teller family were also among the victims. The father, Jacob, was born in Warsaw in 1894; the mother, Golda, was born in Lodz in 1892; and the son, Maurice, was born in Barcelona on June 19, 1921. The parents were deported from Gurs to Drancy and from there to Auschwitz with transport n. 28 on September 4, 1942. Maurice was transferred from Rivesaltes to Drancy and from there to Auschwitz with transport n. 29, on September 7, 1942.<sup>xl</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The relationship between Spain and Auschwitz remains under-researched and it hardly features in the collective memory of the country. An example of this is the reactions surrounding the exhibition: 'Auschwitz: not long ago, not too far away,' inaugurated in Madrid in December 1, 2017. The exhibition has been extended twice as a result of having received more than 450,000 visitors. Several Memory Associations of Republican deportees denounce the exhibition, arguing that it did not include the story of the Republicans. In response, the organization amended various panels to incorporate this part of the story.

The aim of this article was to show, by foregrounding various life histories, some of the most forgotten groups, and to shed light on the complex relationship between the Spanish State and Auschwitz.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Interview by J.M. Calvo of Francesc Pena, grandson of Pedro Monter. Terrassa 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> This information cannot be confirmed.

<sup>iii</sup> Official communication of the commander of the camp of Auschwitz. Copy from the personal archive of Francesc Pena.

<sup>iv</sup> Communist de La Rochelle was responsible for propaganda in the southwest region. Arrested July 30, 1943, executed by firing squad September 21 1942 at Military base of Souge. V. [http://www.fusilles-souge.asso.fr/liste\\_fusilles/rabeaux\\_raym.html](http://www.fusilles-souge.asso.fr/liste_fusilles/rabeaux_raym.html)

<sup>v</sup> Base de dades de Deportats Memorial democràtic.

<sup>vi</sup> Charlotte Delbó, survivor of this transport, has written several works of great literary value which provide testimony of the suffering of these women.

<sup>vii</sup> Maria Alonso was born 8/20/1910 in Santa Fe de Mondújar (Almería). She was a nurse who resided in France and formed part of 'réseau des postiers,' the majority of which were executed or deported. Maria, with prisoner number 31778, died in Auschwitz on the 27th of February in 1943, one month after admission to the camp.

<sup>viii</sup> Luz Higinia Goñi Ayestarán. Born in Cirauqui (Navarra) January 11, 1906. In 1932 she emigrated to Paris and worked in several homes. In 1934 she married José Martos. Both collaborated with the resistance during the Nazi occupation. Luz was arrested in 1941 and imprisoned in La Sante and in the castle of Romainville. In Auschwitz, where she died on the 1 of May 1943, she was assigned the number 31696. V.: <http://www.diariodenavarra.es/especiales/holocausto/>.

<sup>ix</sup> VVAA, *Mujeres bajo el nazismo*.

<sup>x</sup> APMAB, D-Au III Monowitz 3/1, Wocheneichte, vol 5.

<sup>xi</sup> Rodríguez, *Los esclavos españoles de Hitler*, 71-72.

<sup>xii</sup> Sugarman, *Against Fascism*, 1.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibañez, *Judíos en las Brigades Internacionales*, 108-109.

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- <sup>xiv</sup> See: Fernández, *Judios en la guerra de España*; Medem, *Los Judios Luchadores*; Toch, *Juden im Spanischen Krieg 1936-39*.
- <sup>xv</sup> Lustiger, 'The Jews,' 174.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Algemeiner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland* (General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia).
- <sup>xvii</sup> <http://milimcultural.com.ar/los-judios-y-la-guerra-civil-espanola/>, 8-9.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Lustiger, 'The Jews,' 178.
- <sup>xix</sup> Charles Fawcett. Interview Code 15396 USC Foundation. Visual Archive.
- <sup>xx</sup> Organized by the Polish United Worker's Party, the anti-zionist campaign of 1968-1971. The assault on the Jews teemed with declarations against antisemitism. Of the 83000 members expelled from the Communist party, nearly all were Jewish. Almost 9000 Jews lost their jobs and hundreds were thrown out of their apartments. The regime allowed Jewish citizens to leave the country under two conditions: they should revoke their citizenship and they should declare Israel as the country of their destination.
- <sup>xxi</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2008/04/10/emanuel-mink-une-figure-de-la-guerre-civile-espagnole\\_1033116\\_3382.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2008/04/10/emanuel-mink-une-figure-de-la-guerre-civile-espagnole_1033116_3382.html);  
<http://bdi.memorialdelashoah.org/internet/jsp/core/MmsRedirector.jsp?id=40510&type=VICTIM>  
<http://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=3203903&ind=5>.
- <sup>xxii</sup> It has not been possible to prove that all 61 were in Auschwitz.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> There is some discrepancy among sources regarding the precise year of death.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> <https://www.doew.at/erinnern/biographien/spanienarchiv-online/spanienfreiwillige-p/peczenik-hermann>, <http://sidbrint.ub.edu/ca/content/peczenik-anni>;  
<http://bdi.memorialdelashoah.org/internet/jsp/core/MmsRedirector.jsp?id=44777&type=VICTIM>. Page of Testimony n. 10607400. Arxius Yad Vashem.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Doc No. 11191279#1 (1.1.9.9/0023/0034) ITS Archives, 05.12.2012. Archivnummer 4143. Doc No. 11191280#1 (1.1.9.9/0023/0035.) ITS Archives, 05.12.2012. Archivnummer 4143. Doc No. 11191282#1 (1.1.9.9/0023/0037.) ITS Archives, 05.12.2012. Archivnummer 4143 I Doc No. 11191285#1 (1.1.9.9/0023/0040.) ITS Archives, 05.12.2012. Archivnummer 4143.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Doc. No. 84256929#1 in conformity with the ITS Archives. Page of Testimony n. 2042357 and Page of Testimony n. 752250. Yad Vashem Archives.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Page of Testimony n. 5251365 and Page of Testimony n. 1387378. Yad Vashem Archives. Jerusalem.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> <http://bdi.memorialdelashoah.org/internet/jsp/core/MmsRedirector.jsp?id=41236&type=VICTIM#>
- <sup>xxix</sup> <http://bdi.memorialdelashoah.org/internet/jsp/core/MmsRedirector.jsp?id=72768&type=VICTIM>
- <sup>xxx</sup> Page of Testimony n. 1385876. Yad Vashem Archives.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Page of Testimony n. 1873572. Yad Vashem Archives.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> <http://bdi.memorialdelashoah.org/internet/jsp/core/MmsRedirector.jsp?id=9393&type=VICTIM#>
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Starbebuch Band 913/1913, s. 1252. Sygn. D- AuI-219.N. 172344. Panstowove Muzeum. Auschwitz - Birkenau. Dzial Archiwum.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Drancy T18,s. 3069. Sygn. D-RF.3/53. N. 22053. Panstowove Muzeum. Auschwitz -Birkenau. Dzial Archiwum.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Their surname was probably Del Valle, and in Yad Vashem's archives appear as Delevi.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Drancy T22,s. 3755. Sygn. D-RF.3/63. N. 22064. Panstowove Muzeum. Auschwitz -Birkenau. Dzial Archiwum.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Drancy Tr. 30.6.1944. Sygn. D-RF.3179. N. 106530. Panstowove Muzeum. Auschwitz -Birkenau. Dzial Archiwum.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> [http://bancmemorial.gencat.cat/amics\\_consulta/fitxaacompletaview.php?id\\_persona=9060](http://bancmemorial.gencat.cat/amics_consulta/fitxaacompletaview.php?id_persona=9060). Drancy T26,s. 4251. Sygn. D-RF.3173. N. 22074. Panstowove Muzeum. Auschwitz -Birkenau. Dzial Archiwum. Page of Testimony n. 3985917. Yad Vashem Archives.
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# **Auschwitz as a Symbol of Martyrdom of the Polish Nation, 1947 and 2017**

## **Abstract:**

Two events that occurred in 1947—ceremonies on the Auschwitz site on June 14, the day the first transport of Polish prisoners arrived in the camp in 1940, and the adoption of a law commemorating the ‘martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim’ on July 2—defined Auschwitz in Poland as most of all a Polish national symbol, the symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation. Upon recalling those events and outlining their significance, this paper aims to answer the question in what sense was Auschwitz a symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation in Poland 70 years on, when the country was ruled by the right-wing populists with a strong nationalistic agenda, and in the earlier years. Two processes are analysed in this regard—the instituting of June 14 as a National Remembrance Day and commemorations on June 14. This paper shows that the National Remembrance Day, although intended to commemorate Poles only, was legislated as a day of remembrance for all victims of all Nazi camps. The paper also shows that the commemorations on June 14, which were initially low-key ceremonies mainly for former prisoners, became high-profile and political in 2017 as the government used them to pursue their nationalistic ‘historical policy,’ reiterating the martyrdom of the Poles during World War Two and highlighting their engagement in helping the Jews.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz, Poland, commemoration, remembrance, memory, politics

## Introduction

On June 14, 1947 tens of thousands of people gathered on the site of the former Auschwitz I main camp for the ‘Ceremonies of the rally of the Fellowship of Prisoners and opening of the State Museum in Oświęcim.’<sup>i</sup> The event was indeed attended by many former prisoners, mainly Polish, including Poland’s then-Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz. The relatives of prisoners and other concerned people were also present. The ceremonies began with four religious services—Catholic in the courtyard of Block 11, Jewish in Block 4, and Orthodox and Evangelical in Block 11. Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz then gave a speech. The speech, full of universalist remarks, ended with the universalist call ‘Never again Auschwitz!’ (Nigdy więcej Oświęcimia!). After the speeches of other officials, the participants of the rally laid wreaths and paid homage to the victims of the camp at the (reconstructed) Execution Wall (Ściana Straceń), also called the Death Wall (Ściana Śmierci), the site of executions by shooting of (mostly) Polish prisoners, in the courtyard of Block 11. Next, Cyrankiewicz officially opened the museum. Then, the participants walked to the former Auschwitz II Birkenau camp where they laid flowers at the ruins of gas chambers and crematoria in order to pay homage to the victims.

Although the ceremonies of June 14, 1947 had a universalist, international(ist), multi-religious, and, last but not least, specifically Jewish significance, they defined Auschwitz as primarily a Polish symbol, the symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation. As indicated elsewhere, the ceremonies of June 14, 1947 were the utmost manifestation of a ‘Polish symbolism of Auschwitz.’<sup>ii</sup> They were held on the day the first transport of Polish prisoners arrived in KL Auschwitz in 1940, the fact that has been regarded in Poland as the beginning of the operation of the camp. The vast majority of the participants were Polish, many of them the former Polish prisoners of Auschwitz. The main speaker was Poland’s prime minister, also a former prisoner. The central commemorative ceremony took place at the Execution Wall in the courtyard of Block 11 in the former Auschwitz I main camp, which had been the sites of (mostly) Polish

victimhood, and which came to be regarded as the sacred spaces of Polish suffering and death at Auschwitz. Although never made explicitly so, the ceremony at the Death Wall was indeed (primarily) in remembrance of the Poles who had perished in the camp, while the ceremony at the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria was primarily in remembrance of the Jews murdered there. Lastly, the ceremonies included that of the opening of a museum founded by the Polish state, the ‘Museum of Polish Martyrology,’ as it was referred to by the Polish press at that time.<sup>iii</sup>

Almost three weeks after the rally in Oświęcim, the Polish parliament (Sejm Ustawodawczy) adopted a law concerning the former Auschwitz camp.<sup>iv</sup> The main provisions of that law, which remains valid to this day, were contained in its title and articles 1–3. The title is: *The Act of July 2, 1947 on the commemoration of martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim*.<sup>v</sup> Article 1 states: ‘The grounds of the former Hitlerite concentration camp in Oświęcim with all [its] buildings and equipment are preserved for all times as the Memorial of Martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations.’ Article 2 stipulates: ‘The Memorial of Martyrdom in Oświęcim covers part of the grounds of the former concentration camp...,’ which turned out to be the major parts of the former Auschwitz I main camp (KL Auschwitz I Stammlager) and the former Auschwitz II Birkenau camp (KL Auschwitz II Birkenau). Article 3 orders: ‘On those grounds one creates the Oświęcim-Brzezinka State Museum’ whose name was changed to the ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim’ through the only amendment to the act of 1947, *The Act of May 7, 1999 on the protection of the grounds of the former Hitlerite camps of destruction*.<sup>vi</sup>

The act of 1947 legally determined what Auschwitz became in postwar Poland and what was to be done about it. The former camp, specifically, most of KL Auschwitz I Stammlager and KL Auschwitz II Birkenau, became a memorial and a museum. The area and relics of those parts of the former camp were to be preserved forever. What happened in the camp was

commemorated through the act and was to be memorialised for all times. The most important provision of the act concerned what was commemorated and was to be memorialised. The title and Article 1 of the act named it ‘the martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations’ (męczeństwo Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów).<sup>vii</sup> The term ‘martyrdom’ implied that the camp’s victims had been ‘martyrs,’ that is, those who suffered and died for their religious faith, political convictions, nation, human dignity or other higher beliefs or causes. The usage of such terms was not a practice unique to Auschwitz or Poland at that time.<sup>viii</sup> Yet in the context of Auschwitz—the site of destruction of Jews, Poles, Roma and Sinti, Soviet prisoners of war, and others—the term ‘martyrdom’ either subsumed under the category ‘martyr’ or excluded the vast majority of the camp’s victims who did not suffer or die for a higher good, but fell victims of racial or ethnic persecution and genocide. Moreover, the title and Article 1 of the act indicated that the commemorated martyrdom concerned ‘the Polish Nation and other Nations.’ This phrase, used in a law and adopted by parliament, arguably defined the victims in national terms, as citizens of Poland and other countries. A consequence was that the Jews and the Roma and Sinti disappeared as distinct categories. Yet in Poland, a country where ethno-nationalism has always been strong and that became almost mono-ethnically Polish after the war, the phrase ‘the Polish Nation and other Nations’ like the word ‘nation’ was understood largely in the ethnic sense. A consequence was that the Jews—the largest category of Auschwitz deportees, prisoners, and victims—were listed last in official Polish publications as the Polish word for them (Żydzi) begins with the last letter of the alphabet. More importantly, regardless of whether the word ‘nation’ was understood in the civic or ethnic sense, the phrase ‘martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations’ placed the suffering and death of the Poles first, above the victimhood of others. This was a legal rendering of what Jonathan Huener called ‘a Polish-national martyrological idiom’ that was characteristic of Poland’s postwar commemorative vocabulary in general and in reference to Auschwitz in particular.<sup>ix</sup> In sum, the *Act of July 2*,



1947 legally designated Auschwitz most of all a Polish national symbol, the symbol of martyrdom of the Poles at the hands of the Germans during World War Two.

Having recalled the two events of 1947 and their significance, it will now be considered in what sense Auschwitz was in Poland a symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation 70 years on and in the earlier years. Two mnemonic practices and their products most likely to exhibit the characteristics of the Polish symbolism of Auschwitz will be analysed in this regard—the instituting of June 14 as a National Remembrance Day in 2000–2015 and the commemorations on June 14 since 2000, especially in 2017.

### **Instituting June 14 as a National Remembrance Day**

Until recently, there was no national remembrance day concerning Auschwitz in Poland, even though annual commemorations have been held on June 14, the day of the first transport of Polish prisoners to KL Auschwitz in 1940. Anniversaries of the liberation of the camp on January 27, 1945 have also been observed. In 2000 a proposal to institute June 14 as the Day of Remembrance for the Polish Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps (Dzień Pamięci o Polskich Ofiarach Nazistowskich Obozów Koncentracyjnych) and January 27 as the Day of Remembrance for the Holocaust in Poland (Dzień Pamięci o Holocauście w Polsce) was put forward by the Christian Association of Auschwitz Families (Chrześcijańskie Stowarzyszenie Rodzin Oświęcimskich, ChSRO), a nonprofit organization of individuals concerned with the Auschwitz camp, former prisoners and their families, established in 1998.<sup>x</sup> The association gained support for their initiative from members of the assembly of the Małopolska province where the former camp is located. In 2000 the assembly passed a resolution calling upon the Polish parliament (Sejm) and government ‘to proclaim June 14 the Day of Remembrance for the Polish Victims of KL Auschwitz and other Nazi Concentration Camps’ (Dzień Pamięci o Polskich Ofiarach KL Auschwitz i innych Nazistowskich Obozów Koncentracyjnych) and, ‘at the same time, like in other countries, also in Poland, to proclaim January 27 the Day of

Remembrance for the Holocaust' (Dzień Pamięci o Holokauście).<sup>xi</sup> ChSRO also petitioned the parliament, the government, and the president on the matter. However, none of those state organs was taking any action, no matter who was in power or to what political spectrum they belonged: the post-communist President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (1995–2005), the post-Solidarity center-right government of Jerzy Buzek (1997–2001), or the post-communist left governments of Leszek Miller (2001–2004) and Marek Belka (2004–2005). Yet, President Kwaśniewski and all consecutive governments of Poland joined in the international efforts to commemorate the Holocaust on January 27, endorsing the 'Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust' in 2000, the Council of Europe's 'Declaration by the European Ministers of Education' in 2002, and the 'Resolution adopted by the [United Nations] General Assembly on the Holocaust Remembrance' in 2005. The President also hosted, and the respective governments helped the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum to organise, the big international commemorations on the camp's site on January 27, 2000 and 2005. However, they did not do anything about June 14.

In 2006, after the right-wing president Lech Kaczyński and the right-wing and nationalist coalition government led by the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party had begun ruling Poland, ChSRO petitioned the parliament again to designate June 14 a memorial day of specifically Polish victims of the camps designated as German and Nazi: 'the National Day of Remembrance for the Polish Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps' (Narodowy Dzień Pamięci o Polskich Ofiarach Niemieckich Nazistowskich Obozów Koncentracyjnych).<sup>xii</sup> This time the parliament took action following the association's move. Yet, surprisingly enough, while working on the proposal, the parliament's committee decided to change the reference from 'Polish Victims,' which was specific, nationalist, and exclusive, to 'Victims,' which was general, universalist, and inclusive. The committee also decided to use just one adjective, 'Nazi,' to describe the camps. Thus, the parliament's resolution, adopted by

acclamation, instituted June 14 as the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps (Narodowy Dzień Pamięci Ofiar Nazistowskich Obozów Koncentracyjnych).<sup>xiii</sup> The parliament, however, did not legislate January 27 as the [National] Day of Remembrance for the Holocaust, which ChSRO had also proposed and the provincial assembly had supported. Nevertheless, since 2003, January 27 has been observed in schools throughout the country as the ‘Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and for the Prevention of Crimes against Humanity,’ instituted by the Council of Europe in 2002. Since 2006 that day has also been observed in Poland as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day legislated by the UN.

June 14 was in Poland the only formal remembrance day concerning Auschwitz until 2011. In that year, the parliament adopted a resolution instituting August 2 as the Day of Remembrance for the Destruction of the Roma and Sinti (Dzień Pamięci o Zagładzie Romów i Sinti).<sup>xiv</sup> August 2 was chosen to commemorate the day in 1944 when almost three thousand Romani and Sinti men, women, and children were murdered in the gas chambers of Birkenau and the ‘Gypsy camp’ at Auschwitz was liquidated.

The National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps was observed under this name until 2014. In 2015 the centrist Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska), the major party in the coalition that was ruling Poland in 2007–2015, moved and the parliament changed the name of the day by acclamation. Two changes were made. The first consisted in adding the adjective ‘German’ to describe the ‘Nazi Camps.’ This was in line with the ChSRO’s proposal of 2006 and ‘in the name of historical truth,’ as the parliament’s resolution stated.<sup>xv</sup> Secondly, the phrase ‘Extermination Camps’ (obozы zagłady) was added to designate which victims were to be remembered. As a result, the scope of those to be remembered, initially comprising all victims of the concentration camps, was extended to include the Jews from occupied Poland and other countries, and also the Roma murdered in the extermination camps,

making the National Day of Remembrance even more inclusive and universalist. This was against the idea of ChSRO of 2000 and 2006, and the Małopolska Assembly's resolution of 2000 to commemorate specifically Polish victims on June 14. Thus since 2015, June 14 has in Poland been the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps (Narodowy Dzień Pamięci Ofiar Niemieckich Nazistowskich Obozów Koncentracyjnych i Obozów Zagłady). As for January 27, the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and for the Prevention of Crimes against Humanity and the International Holocaust Remembrance Day also observed by Poland, commemorations on that day have been held in schools and on the Auschwitz site annually, including big international events hosted by the country's authorities in 2010 and 2015. Yet the day has not gained the formal status of a National Remembrance Day.

Neither the old nor the new name of the June 14 National Remembrance Day satisfied the initiator to institute it, ChSRO. After the right-wing and nationalist Law and Justice party had won the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015, ChSRO petitioned the parliament again to change the name of the day. As ever, the association wanted to specifically commemorate the Polish victims. They also wanted to limit the commemorations to the victims of the concentration camps. This time the association also desired that the camps would be referred to as German rather than Nazi or German Nazi. The name that they proposed was the National Day of Remembrance for the Polish Victims of the German Concentration Camps (Narodowy Dzień Pamięci Polskich Ofiar Niemieckich Obozów Koncentracyjnych).<sup>xvi</sup> Interestingly enough, the speaker of the parliament representing the ruling Law and Justice party did not reply to these calls. Thus the party upheld a universalist and inclusive name of the June 14 National Remembrance Day adopted by consensus of the whole parliament during their first government in 2006 and an even more universalist and inclusive name also adopted by consensus during the rule of their major opponent, the Civic Platform, before the change of

power in 2015. Moreover, the new Law and Justice government engaged in the commemorations of the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps, reaffirming its name and elevating its status, but giving a new meaning to it.

### **Commemorating June 14**

Before June 14 was made a National Remembrance Day in 2006, annual commemorations of the first transport of Polish prisoners to KL Auschwitz had been held in Oświęcim on that day.<sup>xvii</sup> Except for the big and high-profile event on the site of the former camp in 1947, attended by Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz, the commemorations were usually small and low-key, involving primarily the former prisoners, with hardly any engagement of the state authorities. Commemorations were also held in Tarnów, the town from which the first transport of Poles was deported. The commemorations in Oświęcim and also those in Tarnów were organised by associations of former prisoners and people concerned with the camp (ChSRO in 1999–2014), the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (the main organiser since 2015), the local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and branches of the Roman-Catholic Church. In the 2000s, the commemorations on June 14 in Oświęcim consisted of: the Holy Mass for the victims of the camp in a church by the museum, a church at the Franciscan monastery in nearby Harmęże or in the open air in front of Block 11; the main ceremony of giving speeches, laying wreaths, lighting candles and paying homage to all victims of the camp at the Execution Wall; a commemorative ceremony at the building where the prisoners from the first transport had been placed upon arrival, the building that houses a university named after Cavalry Captain Witold Pilecki, a Polish prisoner of and escapee from Auschwitz; a cultural event; and a former prisoners' reunion and a meal.<sup>xviii</sup> The reunions were often held at the Franciscan monastery in Harmęże, in the Centre of Saint Maximilian, a Polish Franciscan friar and a prisoner of Auschwitz who gave his life in exchange for that of a fellow (Polish) prisoner. A day before

those commemorations, commemorations in Tarnów comprised a gathering in the Town Hall and ceremonies at the Monument to the First Transport of Prisoners to KL Auschwitz, dedicated in 1975, and at the railway station at the Obelisk of Memory to the First Transport of Prisoners to KL Auschwitz, unveiled in 2010; the Holy Mass, and a reunion dinner.<sup>xix</sup>

After June 14 had been instituted as the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps in 2006, the commemorations of the first transport of prisoners to Auschwitz continued along the established pattern. Remarkably, they did not gain a state character, which would have been manifested through the presence of a state official or at least an official's letter, wreath, or honorary patronage. Only in 2009 a wreath from the late President Lech Kaczyński was laid at the Execution Wall,<sup>xx</sup> and in 2015 President Bronisław Komorowski granted his honorary patronage to the first commemorations of the newly named National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps.<sup>xxi</sup>

After the right-wing and nationalist President Andrzej Duda and government of the Law and Justice party and its allies had begun ruling Poland in late 2015, the ensuing commemorations of the National Day of Remembrance gained a strong state character.<sup>xxii</sup> In 2016, the representatives of President Duda, Prime Minister Beata Szydło, and other state officials came to the ceremonies. In 2017, the Prime Minister herself accompanied by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński headed the government's delegation to the commemorations that President Duda granted honorary patronage. That was not the first visit to the Auschwitz site of Mrs. Szydło, a native and long-time resident of a nearby village, whose relative was a prisoner of the camp and lost his life there. It was also not her first visit to the Auschwitz site as Prime Minister. In 2016 she was there during Pope Francis's visit. She also attended the ceremonies of the '75th anniversary of the martyrdom of Saint Maximilian M. Kolbe.' In 2018, Szydło, who then served as Deputy Prime Minister, and

Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage Jarosław Sellin attended the ceremonies of June 14 again.

The first commemorations of June 14 under the rule of the Law and Justice government in 2016, attended by the representatives of the state top officials, were all about remembrance. No politics was involved. In the letters read out by their representatives, the President, the Prime Minister and other officials commemorated all victims of the camp, Jews and Poles and others, in particular the prisoners of the first transport. This was quite surprising as the government had already launched their nationalistic ‘historical policy’ (*polityka historyczna*) that stressed the heroism and victimhood of the Polish nation. Referring to Auschwitz as a symbol of Polish martyrdom would have suited that policy. Yet at that time the Law and Justice party decided not to revive that symbolism. The only nationalistic component of the commemorations was the ostensive presence of women and men with Polish flags, members of the newly established Association of Families of the Polish Victims of Concentration Camps (Stowarzyszenie Rodzin Polskich Ofiar Obozów Koncentracyjnych).<sup>xxiii</sup> The association’s members were also visible during commemorations in the following years.

In 2017 the commemorations turned out to be very political. This was not because of the presence of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Culture, but because of what they said and did, and how this was received. The liberal media in Poland and the opposition politicians picked out the final sentence from Prime Minister Szydło’s official speech and fiercely criticised her.<sup>xxiv</sup> The sentence was: ‘Auschwitz is a great lesson in today’s troubled times that everything must be done to protect the safety and lives of one’s citizens.’<sup>xxv</sup> The critics accused the Prime Minister of using the memory of Auschwitz to spread fear of immigrants among the Poles and to justify her government’s anti-immigration policy. Regardless of the amount of attention drawn by that sentence, it was not the most important aspect of the speech. Speaking of the Auschwitz victims, she referred to them as ‘people,’ without mentioning that the vast

majority of them were Jewish. Recalling the first mass transport from Tarnów, she did not say that those prisoners were Polish, either.<sup>xxvi</sup> Thus she confirmed the universalist character of the National Day of Remembrance. Yet she also reminded the audience of the victimhood of the Poles during World War Two and their ‘courage,’ ‘sacrifice,’ ‘even heroism’ in ‘giving help to the Jews.’ In this way Szydło’s speech was another manifestation of the Law and Justice government’s ‘historical policy,’ which stressed Polish victimhood and heroism as well as emphasised Polish engagement in rescuing Jews. The most important part of her speech was, arguably, the announcement of the creation of the ‘Museum of the Righteous from near Auschwitz’ (Muzeum Sprawiedliwych spod Auschwitz).<sup>xxvii</sup> The word ‘Righteous’ used in the museum’s name was an explicit and, arguably, illegitimate reference to the honorific of the ‘Righteous among the Nations,’ bestowed by Yad Vashem to non-Jews for risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>xxviii</sup> Szydło explained that the museum would commemorate ‘the brave inhabitants of nearby towns and villages... who saved the prisoners... that managed to escape from the Auschwitz camp..., who shared with the prisoners of the camp their bread and hope for a better future.’<sup>xxix</sup> The new museum was the subject matter of a letter of intent signed by Minister Gliński and the county authorities just after the Prime Minister’s speech. However, the name of the museum was listed differently in the document as the ‘Museum of Those Bringing Help (Muzeum Niosących Pomoc).’<sup>xxx</sup> Yet another name was given to the museum by the County Council that formally established it in 2017: the Museum of Remembrance for the Residents of the Oświęcim Land (Muzeum Pamięci Mieszkańców Ziemi Oświęcimskiej).<sup>xxxi</sup> This name also appeared in the document granting funds to the museum signed by Deputy Minister Sellin and the county authorities during the ceremonies on June 14, 2018.<sup>xxxii</sup> The museum, due to open on January 27, 2022, is to be arranged near the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim, in the building of the former Lagerhaus (a warehouse of



food for the SS operating KL Auschwitz); it was here that the Prime Minister announced the creation of the museum and the letter of intent concerning it was signed in 2017.

## **Conclusions**

The idea of Auschwitz as a symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation was epitomised through the ‘Ceremonies of the rally of the Fellowship of Prisoners and opening of the State Museum in Oświęcim’ on June 14, 1947, and ‘The Act of July 2, 1947 on the commemoration of martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim.’ It was also evident in the instituting of June 14 as a National Remembrance Day in 2000–2015 and the commemorations on June 14, especially under the right-wing and nationalist government of the Law and Justice party in 2017. The recent manifestations of this idea, however, have a somehow different meaning to the one conveyed through the two events in 1947. While the latter made Auschwitz most of all a Polish national symbol and made the Poles (in either the civic or ethnic sense) the main if not the largest victim group, at present Auschwitz as a symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation essentially means that the Poles (in either meaning) were the first to suffer and die at the camp, and their suffering and death marked the beginning of Auschwitz and other Nazi camps and victimhood of all other groups.

The initiative put forward in 2000 by the Christian Association of Auschwitz Families to designate June 14 the Day of Remembrance for the Polish Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps—the day of remembrance for exclusively Polish victims—may be regarded as the most ostensive reference to the old idea of Auschwitz as primarily a symbol of Polish martyrdom. However, the resolutions of the Polish parliament to make June 14 the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps (2006) that later became the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps (2015)—the day of remembrance for *all* victims, not just the Polish ones, of *all* Nazi camps—gave a universalist and inclusive meaning to a day remembered by many

Poles as exclusively Polish and concerning Auschwitz only. Yet the parliament's resolutions may also be regarded as containing a reference to the idea of Auschwitz as a symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation. The meaning of the reference seems to be that it was the first transport of the Polish prisoners on June 14, 1940 that marked the beginning of victimhood at Auschwitz and other camps.

The commemorations on June 14 have always had a Polish and a universalist significance. The Polish meaning stemmed, above all, from the fact that it is the first transport of Polish prisoners to KL Auschwitz that was being commemorated. The universalist significance was given to the commemorations by the ceremonies at the Execution Wall whenever homage was paid to *all* victims of the camp, and the Holy Masses whenever they were celebrated for *all* the victims. The instituting of June 14 as the National Day of Remembrance for all, not just the Polish victims of Auschwitz and other camps, strengthened the universalist dimension of the commemorations. The right-wing and nationalist government of the Law and Justice party not only upheld those symbolic meanings. Prime Minister Szydło speaking in Oświęcim on June 14, 2017 revived an old meaning of Auschwitz and gave it a new one as well. Reiterating that the Poles had been victims of World War Two, she made Auschwitz again the symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation at the hands of the Germans. Stressing that the Poles had helped the Jews during the Holocaust and announcing the creation of the new 'Museum of the Righteous from near Auschwitz,' Poland's Prime Minister made Auschwitz a symbol of Polish heroism in helping Jews. Whether this new peculiar symbolism of Auschwitz will last and, if so, what meaning it will take remains to be seen. It also remains to be seen what will be the future meanings of Auschwitz as a symbol of martyrdom of the Polish nation.

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<sup>i</sup> *Uroczystości*; Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać...?*, 61–62.

<sup>ii</sup> Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny*, 232–244, esp. 236.

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<sup>iii</sup> Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać...?*, 62.

<sup>iv</sup> On the same day a similar law concerning the former Majdanek camp was adopted.

<sup>v</sup> *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ustawa z dnia 7 maja 1999*, art. 20. The act also concerned seven other concentration and/or death camps (order and names as in the act): ‘Majdanek,’ ‘Stutthof – Sztutowo,’ ‘Gross-Rosen – Rogoźnica,’ ‘Treblinka,’ ‘Chełmno nad Nerem’ [Kulmhof], ‘Sobibór,’ and ‘Bełżec.’

<sup>vii</sup> The spelling of the first capital letters in ‘Polish Nation’ (Naród Polski) and the capital letter in ‘other Nations’ (inne Narody), unusual in Polish, was used in the act to stress the significance of those words.

<sup>viii</sup> E.g., the inscription at the famous Warsaw Ghetto Monument by N. Rapaport and M. Suzin, dedicated in 1948, reads: ‘The Jewish people – to its fighters and martyrs’ (Naród żydowski – swym bojownikom i męczennikom). Yad Vashem was established by the Knesset in 1953 as ‘the Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.’

<sup>ix</sup> Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 47–58.

<sup>x</sup> ChSRO, ‘14 czerwca. Geneza.’

<sup>xi</sup> *Rezolucja nr 3/2000 Sejmiku Małopolskiego.*

<sup>xii</sup> ChSRO, ‘14 czerwca. Geneza.’

<sup>xiii</sup> *Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 8 czerwca 2006 r.*

<sup>xiv</sup> *Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 29 lipca 2011 r.*

<sup>xv</sup> *Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 12 czerwca 2015 r.*

<sup>xvi</sup> ChSRO, ‘Pismo do Marszałka Sejmu.’

<sup>xvii</sup> *Obchody 14 czerwca*; Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, ‘Aktualności.’

<sup>xviii</sup> E.g., Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, ‘64. rocznica deportacji.’

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>xx</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, ‘Narodowy Dzień Pamięci – 14 czerwca.’

<sup>xxi</sup> *Patronaty Honorowe Prezydenta RP.*

<sup>xxii</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, ‘76. rocznica pierwszego transportu,’ ‘14 czerwca – Narodowy Dzień Pamięci,’ ‘78. rocznica pierwszego transportu.’

<sup>xxiii</sup> The members of the association became (in)famous for their rude behavior toward former prisoners during the commemorations on January 27, 2018 and subsequent demands of dismissal of the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for his and museum’s alleged not giving proper attention to the Polish suffering and death in the camp.

<sup>xxiv</sup> ‘Skandal w Auschwitz.’

<sup>xxv</sup> *Premier Beata Szydło podczas uroczystości w Auschwitz.*

<sup>xxvi</sup> Interestingly, describing who the prisoners of the first transport were, Szydło mentioned that they included the Jews, which is historically correct.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Premier Beata Szydło...*

<sup>xxviii</sup> The word was illegitimate as Szydło was not granted the right to use it in this context. It was also illegitimate as it was meant to refer to help given not only to the Jewish, but also non-Jewish prisoners of Auschwitz.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Premier Beata Szydło...*

<sup>xxx</sup> Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego, *Oświęcim: list intencyjny ws. Muzeum Niosących Pomoc.*

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Uchwała Nr XXXIII/329/2017.*

<sup>xxxii</sup> Starostwo Powiatowe w Oświęcimiu, ‘Rząd przekaże 35 milionów na Muzeum Mieszkańców Ziemi Oświęcimskiej.’

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*Uchwała Nr XXXIII/329/2017 Rady Powiatu w Oświęcimiu z dnia 8 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie utworzenia muzeum – samorządowej instytucji kultury pod nazwą: Muzeum Pamięci Mieszkańców Ziemi Oświęcimskiej (w organizacji) oraz nadania statutu Muzeum* [Resolution No. XXXIII/329/2017 of the County Council in Oświęcim from August 8, 2017 on the creation of a museum – a self-government cultural institution under the name: Museum of Remembrance for the Residents of the Oświęcim Land (in the organization) and granting the statute to the Museum].

*Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 8 czerwca 2006 r. w 66. rocznicę przybycia pierwszego transportu więźniów do KL Auschwitz* [The resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of June 8, 2006 on the 66th anniversary of the arrival of the first transport of prisoners to KL Auschwitz]. M.P. 2006 nr 40 poz. 435.

*Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 29 lipca 2011 r. w sprawie ustanowienia Dnia Pamięci o Zagładzie Romów i Sinti* [The resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of July 29, 2011 on the establishment of the Day of Remembrance for the Destruction of the Roma and Sinti]. M.P. 2011 nr 70 poz. 690.

*Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 12 czerwca 2015 r. w sprawie ustanowienia dnia 14 czerwca Narodowym Dniem Pamięci Ofiar Niemieckich Nazistowskich Obozów Koncentracyjnych i Obozów Zagłady* [The resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of June 12, 2015 on the instituting of June 14 as the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps]. M.P. 2015 poz. 535.

*Uroczystości zlotu Braci Więźniarskiej i otwarcia Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu* [Ceremonies of the rally of the Fellowship of Prisoners and opening of the State Museum in Oświęcim], Archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

*Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu* [Act of July 2, 1947 on the commemoration of martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim]. Dz. U. 1947 nr 52 poz. 265.

*Ustawa z dnia 7 maja 1999 r. o ochronie terenów byłych hitlerowskich obozów zagłady* [Act of May 7, 1999 on the protection of the grounds of the former Hitlerite camps of destruction]. Dz. U. 1999 nr 41 poz. 412.

# **Delineating Memoryscapes: Auschwitz versus Oświęcim**

## **Abstract:**

This article explores how inhabitants and policy makers in the town of Oświęcim/Auschwitz discursively construct two different memoryscapes in their town. On the one hand, there is the ‘living’, Polish Oświęcim and on the other hand there is the ‘dead’, German Auschwitz. Demarcations between ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’ are fluid and their meaning changes depending on the person who defines it and the audience addressed. Locals draw on these memoryscapes in creating mental borders within their physical living space, especially to create disinvolvement and distance when it comes to the Auschwitz memoryscape.

In this article, I rely on discourse analysis and insights of interactional sociology to study the varying demarcations of ‘Oświęcim’ and ‘Auschwitz’. I base my findings on multiple data sets, generated during ethnographic field work for my PhD dissertation: interviews with policy makers in Auschwitz/Oświęcim, data gathered in the two different Facebook groups in which inhabitants are active, and participant observation among inhabitants of the town.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz, collective memory, toponyms, deixis, Poland.

## **Introduction**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, an inhabitant of Auschwitz/Oświęcim<sup>1</sup> shared an archival picture of a street in the town during the Nazi occupation with the ‘Auschwitz Study Group’ on Facebook (figure 1, see appendix). The Facebook post is exemplary of the complexity of the ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’ memoryscapes and of how they are presented to different

audiences. It is not necessarily the photo but the caption that brings together and intermingles various pasts, memories, physical and mental spaces, and political standpoints. The caption reads: 'The town of Oświęcim, the main photo from the German occupation of Auschwitz. Comes from my collection.' The start of the first sentence, which links the town to its Polish name 'Oświęcim' is important for the author to stress, especially in order to contrast it with the last part of the first sentence: 'Auschwitz.' 'Auschwitz,' then, is linked to the German- note: not 'Nazi German'- occupation of that very same place. It seems as if the writer wants to draw a line between the two words and worlds as existing in two different periods: Oświęcim now and Auschwitz under German rule. However, by employing the term Auschwitz here not referring to the places where the former death camp was located but to the historical town, the author also recognizes that both words refer to a similar physical location; according to this interpretation, the differing names of the site should serve to distinguish between these different time periods.

All this complexity seems to disappear in the Polish version of the post, which is the one the author shared in the group from his personal page. The Polish caption reads 'Discover Oświęcim!!! Occupation...' The reference to Auschwitz, and its distinction from Oświęcim, does not appear in this version. The stress on the Germanness of the occupation has also disappeared. On his personal 'wall,' the writer told me in an interview, does not feel the need to stress both of those aspects, assuming that his in-group of Facebook friends, mostly Polish speaking inhabitants of Auschwitz/Oświęcim, know perfectly what he means when referring to 'Oświęcim' and 'Occupation.' In the Polish post, the complex ideological message the author wanted to convey to the mostly-English-speaking outsiders in the Auschwitz Study Group has turned out to be irrelevant.



This example shows the complexity surrounding the construction of memoryscapes for the inhabitants of Oświęcim/Auschwitz; it also shows that such construction depends on the respective audiences. Interpreting findings in such a way follows a recent tendency within the field of memory studies to re-interpret the work of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory from an interactional sociological angle.<sup>ii</sup> In this article, I unravel this interactive complexity and outline how policy makers and inhabitants of Auschwitz/Oświęcim have conceptualised and internalised ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’ as two different memoryscapes, covering different pasts and memories about those pasts, despite their identical meaning as toponyms. To understand what the concepts ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’ mean for those people and how they relate to actual material structures in the place itself, I utilise the concept of ‘memoryscape’ as Sławomir Kaprański theorised it.<sup>iii</sup> According to Kaprański, memoryscapes can refer to ‘material and symbolic spaces in which memory is expressed.’<sup>iv</sup> They are ‘a matrix of possible attitudes towards the past that can be activated in the commemorative actions of individuals and groups.’<sup>v</sup> Nicholas Saunders refers to them as a ‘palimpsest of overlapping multi-vocal landscapes.’<sup>vi</sup>

Conflict is inherent to Kaprański’s conceptualization of memoryscapes: memoryscapes represent the outcome of struggles for power over memory, but they could also serve as a means in this struggle.<sup>vii</sup> Scholars in the field of memory studies and cultural geography have also included this dynamic, conflictual nature in their study of landscapes and cultural memory. As Jessica Rapson argues, landscapes are not ‘representations of memory’ but they are ‘coordinates in the dialogue that fuels memory’s dynamism and evolution.’<sup>viii</sup> These dynamics that Kaprański and Rapson attribute to either the memoryscape or the landscape, from a socio-anthropological or literary standpoint, are one of the crucial elements which make memoryscapes different from Pierre Nora’s more static concept of ‘lieu de memoire.’<sup>ix</sup>

‘Oświęcim’ and ‘Auschwitz’ are located by the people who use the term is in constant flux depending on the interactive context and the ideological standpoint of the actors. Ideological and ethical struggles for power over (Holocaust) memoryscapes gravely influences their interpretation, and which actions and practices could be normatively allowed to take place in them.<sup>x</sup> These ethical, political and ideological motives are what I lay bare in my analysis of overlapping spaces delineated as two different memoryscapes: ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim.’ In the next sections, I first provide an overview of the history of the toponyms ‘Oświęcim’ and ‘Auschwitz.’ I then look into how political memory agents and inhabitants have attributed meaning to these toponyms. Finally, I investigate the role of person and place deixis in the discursive construction of memoryscapes.

### **Background: a History of Two Toponyms**

The history of the toponyms ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’ dates back to the Middle Ages. Both the Polish and the German version of the town’s name were used since its founding in the 14th century.<sup>xi</sup> The occurrence of two language toponyms is not abnormal in a place located in the continuously shifting borderlands between the German ‘space’ and the consecutive Polish states.<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, the recently founded Auschwitz Jewish Center is right to point out that the Yiddish toponym ‘Oshpitzin’ has also been used by the local Jewish population for centuries.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Nazi Occupation and the Holocaust added another level of meaning to ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim.’ Sławomir Kaprański has used the concept of ‘localization of evil’ to refer to the ways in which place names might denote the symbolic meaning of past horrors that took place in any given space.<sup>xiv</sup> Kaprański notes that it is not only ‘Auschwitz’ where evil is ‘localized’: he also refers to ‘Jedwabne’ as being increasingly used to refer to the involvement of Poles in the Holocaust.<sup>xv</sup> Auschwitz/Oświęcim also physically changed to a large extent because of the

Second World War and Holocaust: new town districts were created, new roads constructed, buildings were repurposed, etc. Today, remains of the Nazi Occupation and the Holocaust can be seen throughout the whole town, not only in the confined zones of the museum: barbed wire can still be found in multiple streets, underground shelters are spread across the town and, until a few years ago, a bunker featured on the main square of the town. The fact that these remains are scattered all around the town makes the delineation and separation of 'Auschwitz' from 'Oświęcim' even more complex.

The conceptual confusion concerning Auschwitz and Oświęcim starts when attempts are made to reconcile the toponymical meanings of 'Auschwitz' and 'Oświęcim' with their respective symbolic meanings, especially because these symbolic meanings are multilayered. Auschwitz/Oświęcim is a 'lieu de carrefour'<sup>xvi</sup> and a 'mnemonic battleground'<sup>xvii</sup> where 'questions of identity are crystalized and fiercely contested by different social groups.'<sup>xviii</sup> The groups, and their different attributions of meaning to Auschwitz and Oświęcim, are multifold and include locals, Poles, Jews, Germans, other national communities, Europe, and even an aspired global memory community.

The 'reconciliation' of the two toponyms which I find most often in my research data is the reference to 'Auschwitz' as the location of the former camp and contemporary museum and to 'Oświęcim' as the town where the contemporary Polish community lives. In this case, 'Auschwitz' is sacralized as a site of commemoration and 'Oświęcim' is the realm of profanity. These usages of the two terms are very common among locals. To arrive at the contemporary spatial and cognitive division between 'Oświęcim the town' and 'Auschwitz the camp,' a few linguistically pragmatic steps have to be taken.

First of all, 'Oświęcim' and 'Auschwitz' are stripped off of their identical toponymical meaning. Secondly, on a non-toponymical but symbolic level, it is only the German word

‘Auschwitz’ that is used to ‘localise evil,’ the word ‘Oświęcim’ remains toponymical in its reference to the town. This is quite counterintuitive, given the fact that in a broader Polish memory discourse also the word ‘Oświęcim’ stands for the martyrdom of the Polish nation.<sup>xix</sup> In a last step, both words are ‘re-toponimized’: Auschwitz refers to the place of the former death camp and Oświęcim to the contemporary town. Exemplary of this ‘re-toponimization’ is the way locals refer to them in everyday conversation. In these conversations ‘here’ (tutaj, in Polish) often refers to what they have named ‘Oświęcim’, and ‘there’ (tam, in Polish) as the place of the former camp which they have named ‘Auschwitz.’ Interestingly, as I outlined before, the museum (‘there’) and the past it represents is physically incorporated in and surrounded by the town (‘here’). But even so, locals tend to conceive of it as two different spaces to distance themselves from ‘Auschwitz’ and the past that ‘Auschwitz’ evokes.

### **Political Memory Agents’ Conceptualization of ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’**

Let me turn now to an analysis of how policy makers and activists in the town of Auschwitz/Oświęcim conceptualize ‘Oświęcim’ and ‘Auschwitz’ as two different though connected memoryscapes. I draw particular attention to the influence that space has on those conceptualized realms, but also the other way around: how these realms impact concrete physical spaces.

In an interview with me, Paweł Sawicki, the head of the press office of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, summarized the burden to which the inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim/Auschwitz are exposed. According to Sawicki, using different toponyms to delineate the memory of the Holocaust and the ‘Auschwitz memoryscape’ from ordinary life and the ‘Oświęcim memoryscape’ can help to somehow relieve that burden:

We try to have this very clear differentiation between using the name Auschwitz and using the name Oświęcim. This is the camp this is the town (...) Auschwitz is clearly linked in the global association with the camp so we need to at least show that there are separate stories, that the town is not responsible by any means. That the camp was created here.

His explanation can also be read as an attempt towards distancing and non-involvement from the inhabitants' side towards 'Auschwitz.'

Despite this delineation, the city council of Oświęcim has also attempted to embrace the memory of the Holocaust in its official memory politics and city branding in the past few years. However, this process has been contentious. From 2002 until 2011 the then mayor of the city, Janusz Marszałek, used the burden of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum on the inhabitants of the town to build his political capital.<sup>xx</sup> That discourse changed after Janusz Marszałek's terms as mayor ended. The city has adopted the promotional slogan 'Oświęcim, city of Peace,' and invests about £170,000<sup>xxi</sup> every year in the 'Life Festival' which aims '(...) to build peaceful relations beyond cultural and state borders where there is no place for discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism.'<sup>xxii</sup> Marek Tarnowski, the head of the city promotion department, describes the vision of the town in an interview with me as: '(...) being aware of the fact that we are linked to Auschwitz-Birkenau and we must take care of peace education.' Along these lines, Paweł Sawicki, sums up the challenges involved in the memory politics of the town in an interview:

Oświęcim promotes itself as the city of peace and this is a way of promotion, or whatever name you want to call it, based somehow on the history that is preserved by the state museum: the history of Auschwitz. So, the city wants to be somehow

recognized not only because of that, but wants to be somehow recognized because they protect the memory and they want to build something on this memory.

Although both Sawicki and Tarnowski make an explicit link between the current town and Holocaust memory, both in policy and in discourse about policy, they repeatedly refer to Auschwitz and Oświęcim as two different places. Other important memory activists and heads of institutions do the same. Tomasz Kuncewicz, head of the Auschwitz Jewish Center, uses 'Oświęcim the town' and 'Auschwitz the camp' as two different sites despite the fact that he is arguing for more 'Auschwitz' in 'Oświęcim':

I think that the history for example of what happened during the war in Oświęcim would be something that is missing. It also would connect the history of the town with Auschwitz and kind of let people understand this place better, but this is a thing what is missing, you know, what happened here, what the Nazis did here in the town, how they tried to change it and what they did here in the town as part the whole complex of Auschwitz, right...

Father Jan Nowak, a catholic priest who is the director of the Center for Dialogue and Prayer, an institution which is located close to the former extermination camp, goes even further, presenting the different naming as if it were a common decision made by decree and as if there were a physical, natural border between the two entities:

We try to show that former concentration camp was past time and the name Auschwitz was only the name of former concentration camp. And other side of the river is just city. The name is Oświęcim. We divided and with the help of the people of city we underline this kind of meaning. We are trying to show that real people live in the city Oświęcim and also we are trying to show them that there are real people and they live in this place.

However, in Nowak's discourse, the dynamics of the Auschwitz vs. Oświęcim distinction do not apply when it comes to the neighboring town of Brzezinka, named Birkenau by the Germans. In an interview, he even referred to the former extermination site with both the Polish and German equivalent: '(...) because when we are talking about the part of former concentration camp the name Brzezinka that means Birkenau (...).' The fact that 'Brzezinka' is less well-known as a place name than 'Oświęcim' might have played a role here in his choice of words. Further investigation is necessary here.

### **Alternating Meanings of 'Auschwitz' and 'Oświęcim' for a Group of Inhabitants of Auschwitz/Oświęcim**

The distinction between Auschwitz and Oświęcim is not only something which is upheld by prominent memory activists and policy makers. The inhabitants of the town have also internalized the two different 'memoriscapes.' When I produced the documentary program 'Living in Auschwitz' for the Belgian public broadcaster VRT in 2015, the title evoked much discussion in the town. My usage of the word 'Auschwitz,' and not 'Oświęcim,' was informed by two choices: I wanted to show that Auschwitz was not only a former death camp but also a town, and I wanted the (Belgian) viewer to recognize the possible difficulties and dilemmas of living in Auschwitz using that well-known word. In other words: I decided not to divide the two memoriscapes but treat them as one. This was very much opposed by the town's inhabitants.

In a Facebook group of inhabitants, a screening of 'Living in Auschwitz' in the Auschwitz Jewish Center was announced as about 'life in Oświęcim.' One person remarked: 'This is that one about life in "Auschwitz"?' In response, the person announcing the screening replied: 'Yes, about life in Auschwitz but it should have been about life in Oświęcim.' On another post relating to the film someone ironically commented 'because hard is life in Auschwitz.'

A few months after that discussion, the members of this very Facebook group decided to make a film about their town. The fictional film represents the town during three historical time periods: the pre-war Oświęcim, the war-time Auschwitz, and the contemporary Oświęcim. The title 'Oświęcim-Auschwitz: at the junction of two worlds' indicates not only a spatial but also a temporal distinction between the two concepts.

Two of the producers of this film are also active in the Auschwitz Study Group on Facebook, a group established for an international audience with an (non-academic) interest in the history of Auschwitz. When they turn to that international online audience in the Auschwitz Study Group, these two people are very cautious about making the distinction between Oświęcim and Auschwitz clear. Participant A always refers to Holocaust sites as 'Auschwitz I' or 'Auschwitz II Birkenau' when he posts pictures in the group. When he is posting historical or contemporary pictures of the town, he uses the word 'Oświęcim,' making clear that it is a space which is inherently different than the spaces where the Holocaust took place. In that sense, the concept of 'Oświęcim' is inclusive to the local history of other groups than only the catholic Poles. Participant A includes for example 'the Jewish cemetery in Oświęcim'. In December 2015, Participant A posted six pictures of the Christmas decorations on the main square of the town (figure 2, see appendix). The caption reads: 'Oświęcim old town at night. My pictures. Oświęcim is not only a museum of Auschwitz, it is also a beautiful city. I invite all for visit.' This description, alongside multiple posts in the group of pictures of the town with the caption 'Meet old Oświęcim,' attribute to the word Oświęcim a positive connotation, which makes it easier for inhabitants to promote their town for outsiders.

Participant A is not the only inhabitant of Auschwitz/Oświęcim active in the Auschwitz Study Group. In the context of this analysis it is worth bringing up another participant. Participant B is the author of the statement with which I started this article: 'The town of Oświęcim, the main



photo from the German occupation of Auschwitz. Comes from my collection.’ As is the case in figure 3, participant B, like Participant A, refers to the town as ‘Oświęcim’ in English language posts when posting pictures from the pre-war period, and in all Polish language posts (pre-war, wartime and post-war). In the English language posts these include aerial photos from the town of Oświęcim/Auschwitz in the 1930’s, a photo of orthodox Jews on the main square pre-war and a photo of archeological excavations on the site of the synagogue of Oświęcim/Auschwitz in 2004. When referring to the war-time period in English, Participant B either hyphenates Auschwitz-Oświęcim in a similar fashion to their movie title or refers to the town as ‘Auschwitz (Oświęcim)’ to make sure that he is understood by an international audience (see figure 3, in appendix).

I encountered Participant B also during my ethnographic fieldwork which was conducted mainly on the film set in Auschwitz/Oświęcim. Participant B was involved in the making of the fictional film about the town as the main scenarist and one of the directors. The film is set in the Auschwitz/Oświęcim of the 1930’s and depicts a crime in the fish trade sector. During the production, the group of directors was discussing the final title of the film. A consensus was reached to name the film ‘Oświęcim fish cartel.’ But the process of reaching an agreement on the title was a long and contentious struggle. The majority of the production team wanted the word ‘murder’ (zabójstwo) in the title. However, Participant B convinced the team that using the word ‘murder’ in the title would lead the audience to think that movie is about ‘Auschwitz’, and not about ‘Oświęcim.’

These discussions about the title of the movie were held in a group conversation to which I was a silent observer. However, when the group reached an agreement, Participant B addressed me personally to explain the importance of the discussion. Changing the framing of ‘Oświęcim’ as being only about ‘Auschwitz’ was crucial to him. The fact that he felt the need to explain

this to me a second time showed how important it was for him that relative outsiders understand the meaning he and the group attributed to ‘Oświęcim.’ Actually, this exchange was one of the rare occasions during my participant observation that I was treated by the group as a relative outsider, while for the rest of the observation I felt that I was accepted and tolerated as a group member.

For Participant B, explaining the choice for ‘Oświęcim’ and not for ‘Murder’ to me was also used as an opportunity to re-address some issues inhabitants had with ‘Auschwitz’ and the challenges it causes. He told me that a few years ago, protest arose after the local authorities decided to build a crematorium on the town’s main cemetery, which is located at the other side of the town from the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. He also complained that visitors to the museum expressed discomfort in the summer because some refreshment showers were installed during warm summer days. Those showers were too reminiscent of the showers and gas chambers in the camp for some visitors. Participant B concluded by saying that the inhabitants of the town want to do good for the tourists but that there is only seldom acceptance of it.

### **The usage of deixis in delineating ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Oświęcim’**

The delineation of different memoryscapes is very often structured and supported by linguistic pragmatic features. Deixis plays a crucial role in this context. The concept of deixis refers to those words used as a reference in a specific, mostly spoken, utterances which can only be understood when knowing the context of that utterance. The reason for this need for contextual understanding is that deictic references do not refer to something specific which is mentioned in the utterance before, but instead rely for the understanding of a reference on a shared understanding of the meaning of time, place and agency during the utterance. Time deixis, place deixis and person deixis are mostly referred to as the general categories of deixis.<sup>xxiii</sup> In

this article, I focus on both place and, to a minor extent, person deixis because of their salience for discourses of collective identity and the establishment of memoryscapes and the communities inhabiting them.<sup>xxiv</sup> It is especially the place deictic markers ‘here’ (tutaj, in Polish) and ‘there’ (tam, in Polish) that are central to my analysis.

A dialogue between myself and Tomasz Kuncewicz, director of the Auschwitz Jewish Center, about a project for a new museum which would focus on the town during the Second World War and the Holocaust is exemplary for the deictic usage of ‘here’ and ‘there’:

Interviewer: But in your ideal world this would be part of your history of the city of Oświęcim during the war? Because you said there is a need for this kind of museum?

TK: Yeah, but I am talking more about... I think you can have an exhibit, the situation of the town, the occupation of Oświęcim in the town itself. But this topic of helping prisoners could definitely be **over there**.

Interviewer: Over there?

TK: Because it was happening somewhere near Auschwitz. You know this is where it was even happening, you know, so this is kind of separate thing. But of course I think it is very important to have a consistent narration right?

Interviewer: Over there and over here

TK: Sorry?

Interviewer: Over there and over here, do you use it a lot because people in Oświęcim use it all the time?

TK: Yes I use it as well, yes, I use it as well

Interviewer: Does it reinforce distinction between camp and town?

TK: I think, I think, yeah, it does, it does it kind of happens automatically, even, yeah, I say it as well.

Interestingly, when Tomasz Kuncewicz uses ‘over there’ the first time in this dialogue (marked in bold), he considered me, the interviewer, as being part of the knowledgeable in-group that is able to understand the place deictic referencing in the town. Therefore, he did not feel the direct need to explain and specify what he is referring to with ‘over there.’ It ‘happens automatically’ as he says later. At the same time, it also helps inhabitants to distance themselves and their place of living (here) from what happened in ‘Auschwitz’ (there). Interestingly, looking through my whole corpus of interviews with policy makers the here-there construction only appears when the respective interviewees are interviewed in a location which they would probably perceive as being part of the ‘Oświęcim’ memoryscape. Because I left my interviewees the freedom to choose the location of the interview, most of them chose a location in the city center or in their home. Only on two occasions did I interview somebody in a location that would qualify as ‘tam’ (there) in the place deictic scheme sketched above. This is the case for Father Nowak, who was interviewed in the Center for Dialogue and Prayer, located very close to Auschwitz I, and for an employee of the International Youth Meeting center, who was interviewed in the center itself. In both of those conversations the here-there construction as I sketched it above did not appear, neither was it inverted as in ‘here the camp’ and ‘there the town.’ Rather, both interviewees used ‘Auschwitz’ vs. ‘Oświęcim’, or ‘the town’ vs. ‘the camp’ or ‘the museum’ to refer to the two different memoryscapes. A sample of two interviews is too small to draw general conclusions, but my hypothesis would be that the specific words used as place deictic markers differ depending on from within which of the two self-constructed memoryscapes the person is speaking.

Not only place deictic markers but also person deictic markers, mostly pronouns, play an important role in separating different communities and the memoryscapes in which they live. In Auschwitz/Oświęcim the reference ‘U nas’ (‘At ours’), which is both a place and a person deictic, is the most frequently used example. ‘U nas’ almost always refers to the ‘Oświęcim

memoryscape.’ In the Facebook post below (figure 4), for example, a local shows a picture of two small bunkers in Katowice, a city about 40 kilometers away from Auschwitz/Oświęcim. The caption reads: ‘This kind of picture. From Katowice.’ In a comment under the picture the person writes: ‘At ours there are more, in a natural state (winking emoticon)’ (see Figure 4). ‘U nas’ (‘at ours’) in this case refers to ‘Oświęcim.’

But person deixis is not only used by inhabitants to mark ‘Oświęcim’ and its inhabitants and define them in contrast to other places and communities. It is also used to separate different groups within ‘Oświęcim’ itself, especially when it concerns groups which are connected to the ‘Auschwitz’ memoryscape. Local employees of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, for example, use the first person plural ‘we’ in order to separate themselves from other locals. This excerpt from an interview with Paweł Sawicki, head of the press office of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, is exemplary:

Sawicki: (...) interesting example is the seventieth anniversary of liberation where we built a tent over the gate of Birkenau. But in a way the tent was standing on one of the most important intersections in the town of Birkenau, just right the gate and we blocked it for a few weeks and it causes problems with driving and we did not have any problems with the local community of Brzezinka.

Another example is Sawicki’s reference to a monthly magazine ‘Os,’ produced by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum employees for the inhabitants of the town. When Sawicki refers to the magazine he considers it to be ‘ours’ (meaning: from the museum) made for them, ‘the locals’:

Sawicki: We also started publishing our local magazine which we made especially to start having dialogue with the locals. This is Os.

This construction of distance between local museum employees and other locals may seem counterintuitive, but it is a recurring issue. The main reason is that the museum in its exhibition and programs focusses mostly on an audience of visitors which are Polish but not from the town, or international visitors:

Sawicki: You know, we will not be able to, well, the museum is in a more difficult position because in a way we don't have an offer for the local audience. In a way except visiting the museum, because we are not the institution that organizes, you know, theatre plays or concerts.

However, it can also be argued that such an institutionalized, engrained distance between the museum and the inhabitants of the town follows the current tendency within the Polish public sphere to dissociate Poles from the Holocaust. In that respect spaces connected to the Holocaust are constructed as 'other' and mostly 'German.'<sup>xxv</sup> Different authors have observed a gradual 'judaization of Auschwitz.'<sup>xxvi</sup> Dwork and Van Pelt<sup>xxvii</sup> already argued in 1996 that 'Germans' have gradually disowned the town, and that Poles, and in the last two decades, Jews have re-owned the town and the former camp.

## **Conclusion**

What I have demonstrated in this article is that the town of Auschwitz/Oświęcim is divided into two separate memoryscapes by its inhabitants and policy makers: Auschwitz, with its connection to the Holocaust on the one hand, and contemporary Oświęcim on the other hand. These mental conceptions assist inhabitants and policy makers in confining physical spaces and categorizing these spaces as part of the one or the other memoryscape. Also, delineating both memoryscapes helps those people in 'Oświęcim' to distance themselves from 'Auschwitz', despite the historical and material reality which shows that such a strict separation

is very difficult to make. There is a lot of 'Auschwitz' in 'Oświęcim' and certainly a lot of 'Oświęcim' in 'Auschwitz.'

What I have also demonstrated is that the construction of the 'Oświęcim' and 'Auschwitz' memoryscapes is supported by different linguistic tools, such as place and person deixis. Furthermore, I have argued that the degree to which the distinction Auschwitz vs. Oświęcim is made depends on the interactive context and on the audience inhabitants are addressing. The Auschwitz vs. Oświęcim distinction is explicitly reproduced when inhabitants are interacting with non-inhabitant outsiders and is more implicitly reproduced, through place deictic markers such as 'here' and 'there,' within the in-group of inhabitants.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> In this article I distinguish between categories of practice and categories of analysis when it comes to the usage of the words 'Auschwitz' and 'Oświęcim'. As categories of practice both of these words can signify different things for different people, something which is under scrutinization in this article. Auschwitz/Oświęcim then is the category of analysis I use to describe the spatial realm of the town in a purely toponymical sense.

<sup>ii</sup> Gensburger, "Halbwach's studies in collective"; Lebow, Kansteiner, Fogu, "The Politics of Memory", 4.

<sup>iii</sup> Kapralski, "Jews and the Holocaust," 170-197.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibidem, 171.

<sup>v</sup> Ibidem, 172.

<sup>vi</sup> Saunders, "Matter and Memory in," 37.

<sup>vii</sup> Kapralski, "Jews and the Holocaust," 172.

<sup>viii</sup> Rapson, *Topographies of Suffering*, 8.

<sup>ix</sup> Rapson, *Topographies of Suffering*, 9; Rigney, "Divided Pasts: A Premature", 94.

<sup>x</sup> Ibidem, 4. Smith, *Moral Geographies*, 22.

<sup>xi</sup> Dwork, Van Pelt, *Auschwitz. 1207 to Present*, 17-38, 383.

<sup>xii</sup> Dwork, Van Pelt, *Auschwitz. 1207 to Present*, 38-66.

<sup>xiii</sup> Auschwitz Jewish Center, <http://oshpitzin.pl>, last consulted on 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2018

<sup>xiv</sup> Kapralski, "The Jedwabne Village Green," 187.

<sup>xv</sup> In the town of Jedwabne a group of Polish inhabitants murdered the Jewish population on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1941. The publication of Jan Tomasz Gross' book 'Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne, Poland.' In 2001 has started still ongoing public debates about Polish involvement in the Holocaust.

<sup>xvi</sup> Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*.

<sup>xvii</sup> Zubrzycki, "'Oświęcim'/Auschwitz': Archeology of".

<sup>xviii</sup> Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 99.

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<sup>xix</sup> Zubrzycki, “‘Oświęcim’/‘Auschwitz’: Archeology of”. Kucia, “Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny”, 103-104.

<sup>xx</sup> TVN24, “Oświęcim kontra Auschwitz.” <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/Oświęcim-kontra-auschwitz,123295.html>, last consulted on 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2018

<sup>xxi</sup> 800,000 Polish zloty in 2017, source: interview with Marek Tarnowski.

<sup>xxii</sup> <http://lifefestival.pl/en/about-festival>, last consulted on 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2018,

<sup>xxiii</sup> Levinson, “Deixis”, 97-121.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Wodak et al., *Discursive Construction National Identity*, 45-47.

<sup>xxv</sup> Grabowski, “The Holocaust and Poland’s”.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Kapralski, “Amnesia, Nostalgia, and Reconstruction”, 152, Zubrzycki, “‘Oświęcim’/ ‘Auschwitz’: Archeology of”, 23-26, Dwork, Van Pelt, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present*, 359.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Dwork, Van Pelt, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present*, 359.



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## Appendix

Figure 1

I

heeft zijn bericht gedeeld.

29 december 2015

...

The town of Oświęcim, the main photo from the German occupation of Auschwitz comes from my collection



29 december 2015

Poznaj Oświęcim !!!  
Okupacja ...

J.

en 32 anderen

2 reacties

Vind ik leuk

Reageren

Thanks for sharing pieces of your amazing

Figure 2



..

Oświęcim old town at night. My pictures. Oswiecim is not only a museum of Auschwitz, it is also a beautiful city. I invite all for visit.



72 vind-ik-leuks 7 reacties



Vind ik leuk



Reageren



M

en 70 anderen



Lj Gorgeous and so peaceful. Bet its amazing in person.

Vind ik leuk · Beantwoorden · 1 · 6 december 2015 om 21:17

Figure 3

heeft zijn bericht gedeeld.

...

29 december 2015

The City Of Oświęcim (Auschwitz)  
the days of the German occupation  
1942 Photo comes from my collection



29 december 2015

Poznaj Oświęcim !!!  
Okupacja...

Je

en 34 anderen

4 reacties



Figure 4

... heeft een [link](#) gedeeld.

Beheerder · 11 december 2015

Takie zdjęcie. Z Katowic.



D-PT.PPSTATIC.PL

Mi, P en 14 anderen · 5 reacties

Vind ik leuk Reageren

Nog 1 reactie bekijken

U nas jest więcej, w stanie naturalnym 😊

Vind ik leuk · Beantwoorden · 2 j

Voer je opmerking in...

😊 📷 GIF 🎭

